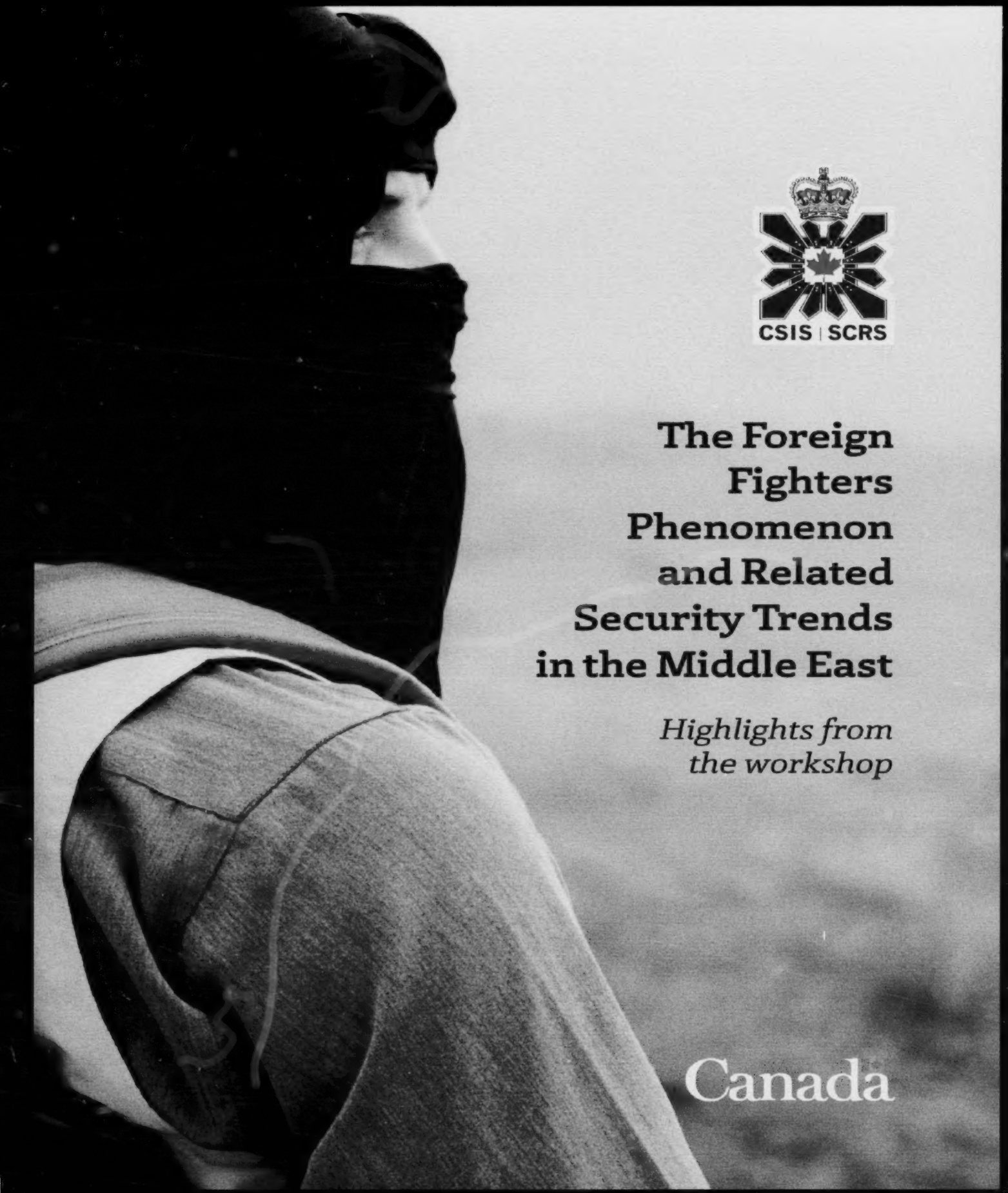

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The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon and Related Security Trends in the Middle East

Highlights from the workshop

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The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon and Related Security Trends in the Middle East

Highlights from the workshop
28-29 October 2015

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The workshop and its objectives

On 28 and 29 October 2015, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) hosted a workshop examining the dynamics underpinning the conflict in Syria and Iraq and related security consequences. The event was held under the CSIS Academic Outreach (AO) program. Unfolding under Chatham House rule, it provided an opportunity for the participants to address the long-term drivers of security in the broader Middle East, as well as the current state of and future prospects for the foreign fighters phenomenon.

This workshop was designed around the work of multiple researchers from North America, Europe and the Middle East. The papers presented at the event form the basis of this report, which also contains a summary provided by the workshop moderator. All parts of the report reflect the views of those independent experts, not those of CSIS.

The AO program at CSIS, established in 2008, aims to promote a dialogue between intelligence practitioners and leading specialists from a wide variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds working in universities, thinktanks, business and other research institutions in Canada and abroad. It may be that some of our interlocutors hold ideas or promote findings that conflict with the views and analysis of the Service, but it is for this specific reason that there is value to engage in this kind of conversation.

Executive summary

Executive summary

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has had considerably destabilising effects in the Middle East and beyond. The humanitarian catastrophe is unprecedented in a region unfortunately used to violence as millions of refugees are straining already scarce resources and infrastructure. From a domestic insurgency, the situation in Syria has morphed into a civil war in which regional and external powers have been steadily expanding their involvement. In neighbouring Iraq, the post-Saddam political system remains fragile, riven by corruption, infighting and sectarian tension.

It is in this volatile context that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) burst onto the scene in 2014, rapidly expanding the territory under its control and setting up many of the features of a state in the territory it holds, which now corresponds roughly to one third of Iraq and Syria. The rise of ISIL has introduced a new dynamic and set a precedent that could reshape the jihadist movement. It has so far demonstrated a unique capacity to adapt, replicate, scale up, inspire others and leverage its opponents' reactions to its advantage. If Al-Qaeda evoked the 'franchise' metaphor, ISIL is more akin to UBER: digitally empowered entrepreneurship with a low-maintenance framework and an unusual ability to absorb pre-existing networks such as residual state bureaucracies, Baath Party remnants and rogue tribes.

The unthinkable forms and levels of violence carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies have helped feed the jihadists' own brutality, which is unprecedented in the history of the jihadist movement. The rise of ISIL has further destabilised the two countries and the region, making the prospects for peace and security ever more distant. A defining characteristic of ISIL has been its unique ability to attract thousands of foreign fighters to fight for its cause. Most are from Arab states, but a significant minority hail from North America, Europe and elsewhere. This has given rise to a threat on an unprecedented scale: the possibility that some of them could return home and launch terrorist attacks against their own countries.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) workshop sought to shed light on the phenomenon of foreign fighters. It explored four broad themes: 1) the main drivers of instability in the Middle

East; 2) how these drivers have contributed to the rise of ISIL and, more specifically, the emergence of the foreign fighters phenomenon; 3) the nature and level of the threat posed by foreign fighters; and 4) tools and programs to counter this threat.

Drivers of instability in the Middle East

As experts at the workshop agreed, there are multiple layers of competition and cooperation in the region, all interacting in a complex way. At the international level, the restraint that the United States has exercised under the administration of Barack Obama by limiting its intervention against ISIL has created an opening for other actors. This has pushed many to increase their level of intervention, either in support of the Assad regime (Russia and Iran) or against it (Saudi Arabia and Turkey, notably). It is unlikely that Washington will significantly ramp up its involvement in Syria and Iraq before the end of President Obama's second term. While it is impossible to predict the policy choices of the next US president, he or she will be heavily constrained given that the intensity and prevalence of *faits accomplis* on the ground in Syria will significantly reduce his or her room for manoeuvre.

The increase in Russia's level of intervention in Syria since September 2015 has given rise to many questions about its intentions. Moscow's best case scenario is, according to one speaker at the workshop, to attempt to preserve Syria as a unitary state and to prop up the Assad camp. This is probably unachievable; as such, Russia's second best alternative is to strengthen the regime's stronghold to contain its losses. Should this fail, its third alternative would be to work to create a protracted conflict, and to eventually support negotiations.

Whatever Russia's precise objectives in Syria, its intervention raises many questions. To what extent are Russian and Iranian interests aligned? Even though they cooperate extensively in supporting the Assad regime, there is significant potential for friction between them, as some of their interests are divergent. Tehran fears seeing its massive investments in support of the Assad regime go to waste as Russia gains in influence. Another question concerns the impact that greater involvement in Syria will have on Russia's relations with the Sunni world, including leading Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, but also with Al-Qaeda, ISIL and other extremist groups.

Insecurity in the Middle East is also shaped by regional drivers. The "toxic competition" between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as one speaker referred to it, has a particularly significant impact on the region's politics. On the Saudi side, the domination of fear in thinking about Iran prevents Riyadh from adopting more moderate policies. On the Iranian side, perceptions of the Saudi rival are characterised by dismissiveness and contempt. Such unbalanced perceptions matter, as they imply that Iran's assertiveness plays a greater role in shaping the bilateral agenda.

Tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran are often described in sectarian terms, with many analyses in the media and in the Middle East framing their struggle as one between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. For one speaker, however, religion acts more as a tool for mobilisation and is not necessarily a driver of the conflict. When under pressure, states can use religion to sustain their identities and to counter threats to their cohesion. Saudi Arabia and Iran, in this view, have actively worked to create the conditions that have fostered the rise of sectarianism. The most fundamental cause of Saudi-Iranian tension, however, is their competition for power and influence.

The Turkish role in Syria illustrates how complex the calculations of the main actors are. On the one hand, Turkey does not want to see Kurdish factions empowered—yet Syrian Kurds are one of Washington's preferred allies in the fight against ISIL. Turkey opposes ISIL, and has never supported it directly; but it is reluctant to engage ISIL directly, in part for fear of reprisal. Conversely, ISIL is also reluctant to provoke direct confrontation with Turkey. Ankara has made of Assad's departure a top priority; it is therefore reluctant to support any initiative, by the US or others, that would help Assad, even indirectly.

> *...the desire of the regional state system to maintain itself might have emerged as a key driver of instability.*

Drivers of instability are also found at the domestic level. In the 20th century, the Middle East featured many strong states with weak societies. Today many states are weakening while their societies are strengthening. In this context, the desire of the regional state system to maintain itself might have emerged as a

key driver of instability. Despite the emergence of such new drivers of instability, traditional ones are still prevalent.

Regional instability fosters the emergence of foreign fighters

These and multiple other factors have fostered the conditions allowing ISIL to emerge and consolidate its position. This, in turn, has facilitated the rise of the foreign fighters phenomenon on an unprecedented scale. According to one speaker, this is partly explained by the emergence of a power vacuum throughout the region. Existing social structures—from the state down to family structure—have been eroding, sometimes fast. In many cases, they have been utterly destroyed. This creates ideal conditions which jihadists exploit in various countries, notably in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Harnessing those dynamics, foreign fighters have been successful at carving out their own role and space, especially in Syria.

Regional struggles for power and influence play a crucial role in fostering the turmoil that has allowed ISIL to emerge and entrench itself. The fight against ISIL is not the first priority for most regional state actors; they may agree on opposing the group, but only as a secondary priority, while they often oppose each other on their first objectives. Turkey, for example, prioritises its opposition to Kurdish aspirations, whereas for Saudi Arabia countering Iran remains the most important objective. This implies that despite a common interest in opposing ISIL among most regional states, there exist serious constraints against building a strong common front.

> *An essential part of ISIL's message, and a key reason for its success, has been its ability to leverage such widespread Sunni anger.*

Domestic conditions in Iraq and Syria have played a central role in fostering the conditions that have allowed the emergence of a safe haven and magnet for foreign fighters. A broken political process in both countries and Sunni alienation and marginalisation are the primary causes of the emergence of ISIL An essential part of ISIL's message, and a key reason for its success, has been its ability to leverage such widespread Sunni anger. This has allowed it to entrench itself territorially and in the minds of many. According to

one speaker, the gap between opposing Sunni Arabs and the Shia-dominated governments is now such that it may have become unbridgeable.

Long-term instability in Syria will further entrench the conditions favourable to the foreign fighters phenomenon. As one speaker assessed, Syria is now de facto fragmented into five regions. Regime-controlled areas had been shrinking by summer 2015, a trend possibly stopped or reversed by the enhanced Russian intervention launched in September of that same year. Yet the conflict is unlikely to subside in the short to medium-term. This implies that the spill-over from Syria will continue to weight on the region for the foreseeable future; it will remain a generator of insecurity and other challenges, including as a safe haven for jihadists and a source of refugee flows for years to come.

Economic grievances, resentment at stagnant and repressive political systems, as well as violence are also in other countries of the region, including Yemen, Egypt and Libya. This underpins the conditions favouring the emergence of additional safe havens for foreign fighters. Even in Turkey, until recently seen as a source of stability, domestic factors have begun contributing to regional chaos. As one speaker explained, the absence of checks and balances on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's power, as well as his erratic behaviour, have contributed to pushing Turkey's foreign policy in a more aggressive and confrontational direction.

The threat of foreign fighters

There is no consensus on the nature and level of the threat that foreign fighters pose to the West. According to one view, there are important factors mitigating the threat of returning foreign fighters. Many die in combat. As one speaker assessed, this particularly applies to Canadians in Syria and Iraq, who are proportionally dying faster than fighters from several other countries. Other fighters choose to stay in theatre to live what they believe is a righteous life. Still others come back disillusioned or wish to return to a normal life.

According to a second view, however, the current wave of foreign fighters represents a major and unparalleled threat to the West, unique in the history of terrorism. Even though it is generally accepted that only a small percentage return to their country of

origin, in light of the considerable numbers making their way to Syria and Iraq, even a small minority of returnees with combat experience and continued allegiance to ISIL represent a major threat. According to this assessment, the conditions that led to the 11 September 2001 attacks—a concentrated presence in Afghanistan of foreign fighters motivated to launch terrorist attacks—are now vastly exceeded, and ISIL has the capacity to undertake Mumbai-style attacks. Finally, according to a proponent of this view, the possibility of reconciliation between ISIL and Al-Qaeda could not only profoundly change the current conflict but also further escalate the threat of foreign fighter terrorist operations in the West.

One speaker highlighted an important implication arising from the return of fighters to war-torn home countries. Returnees can change the dynamics of conflict in their country of origin by bringing greater skill, experience, motivation and ambition. Some bring back insurgency skills; in those cases, it is likely that the use of such tactics by local terrorist or rebel cells will increase. Some returnees may be driven to overreach by excessive ambition, however, while, in other cases, more aggressive returning fighters may become embroiled in infighting with more cautious allies.

Better understanding the fine-grained nature of differences between waves of foreign fighters also leads to a clearer understanding of the threat they pose. According to one speaker, it is essential to distinguish between the first and second waves of fighters originating from the former Soviet space, especially the North Caucasus. Many among the first wave had always shown a greater willingness to return to their home country. The speaker noted, however, that Russia's enhanced intervention since autumn 2015 may accelerate this trend by driving an even greater number of fighters, this time from the second wave, to seek to return to Russia.

It is similarly essential to gain a better understanding of the different methods and approaches used by ISIL and other groups to recruit potential foreign fighters. Particularly relevant have been efforts to better grasp how ISIL uses social media. An important factor behind the explosion in the number of foreign fighters in recent years has been the spread of social media, where groups can operate with an unprecedented level of impunity as Western states have appeared relatively reluctant to control the virtual

space. The self-selection effect has decreased: a few years ago, only those who actively sought terrorist information would access it, whereas now individuals come across jihadist propaganda even if they are not actively seeking it. Problems of trust and security, which had hampered online jihadist activity until five years ago, have been significantly mitigated. Reasons for this evolution include the emergence of new social-media platforms better designed for exchanging information, the difficulties associated with policing some of these platforms, which are privately owned by large Western corporations, as well as resource constraints among Western intelligence services.

Policies and programs to counter the threat posed by foreign fighters

Acquiring nuanced knowledge of the nature and level of the threat posed by foreign fighters is indispensable to building and implementing effective counter-terrorism programs. Multiple actors can play a role in that sense at various points in the foreign fighter life-cycle. Governments, for example, can attempt to prevent exit from the country of origin; they can work with allies and partners at later stages of travel; they can also manage the returns.

To address the threat, the United States has adopted a policy framework based on the three phases of the foreign fighter life-cycle. The first phase consists of the emergence of motivation to resort to violence; it is therefore essential to generate the means to detect this and intervene early. The second phase corresponds to the mobilisation to travel to a zone of conflict to join a terrorist group, followed by a potential attempt to return. At this stage, it is especially crucial to gain accurate information on these individuals, notably through international partnerships. The third phase considers the possibility of reintegrating some returnees; again, this relies on having accurate information distinguishing the most violent individuals from the others.

Participants in the workshop debated approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE) as a tool to prevent individuals from radicalising. Some expressed skepticism as to the relevance of CVE initiatives, highlighting the lack of supporting empirical evidence thus far to measure their effectiveness. Others argued they can be useful, provided that their implementation is not led by

governments. According to this second view, governments are not credible messengers; efforts on their part to implement CVE policies are unlikely to succeed, and can even backfire. Instead, actors such as community organisations and activists should lead efforts to counter violent extremism.

Another speaker explained how an essential non-kinetic tool in a broad portfolio of tools and programs against the threat of foreign fighters should include the encouragement of defections. This element remains poorly understood and underexploited. The goal is to foster and exploit disillusion among foreign fighters, which can be very difficult without external support. A successful approach to degrading ISIL from within needs to sow *doubt* among foreign fighters, promote their *disengagement* and encourage their *defection*. This challenging task can only be accomplished by working closely with partners in the Middle East.

The big picture: An assessment of the foreign fighters threat to the West

Chapter 1 – The big picture: An assessment of the foreign fighters threat to the West

"This is sort of the new normal", FBI Director James Comey observed following the American 4 July 2015 holiday, during which ten persons were arrested and charged in connection with a variety of ISIL-inspired plots[1]. But while the threat of home-grown violent extremism incited by either ISIL or Al-Qaeda is now accepted as fact, there is surprisingly no consensus on the potentially far greater danger posed by radicalised Western foreign fighters returning to their native or adopted homelands to carry out terrorist attacks.

Inevitably, the Arab Afghan exemplar of the 1980s is invoked to justify this grim potentiality. Rather than laying down their arms and quietly resuming their ordinary lives back home, these foreign veterans of the holy war waged against the Red Army's occupation of Afghanistan simply continued their struggle elsewhere. Whether in the Balkans or the Caucasus, on Mindanao or in Kashmir—and in Algeria and Saudi Arabia as well as Egypt and Yemen—these "wandering mujahidin", as an especially prescient 1993 US intelligence analysis termed them, infused local terrorist groups such as Egypt's Gama'at Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, and of course Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, with their newly acquired martial capabilities and enthusiasm for jihad[2]. Indeed, in a May 2014 interview, Director Comey cited precisely this concern, explaining how

> *All of us with a memory of the '80s and '90s saw the line drawn from Afghanistan in the '80s and '90s to Sept. 11. We see Syria as that, but an order of magnitude worse in a couple of respects. Far more people going there. Far easier to travel to and back from. So, there's going to be a diaspora out of Syria at some point and we are determined not to let lines be drawn from Syria today to a future 9/11*[3].

An attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum, just weeks after the interview, in which four persons were killed, appeared to validate those fears. The alleged perpetrator, a 20-year-old French national of Algerian origin named Mehdi Nemmouche, reportedly had spent more than a year in Syria. When he was arrested in Marseilles,

French police found in his possession an ISIL flag and a tape recording claiming responsibility for the incident. An interview with a French hostage previously held captive in Syria by ISIL subsequently revealed that Nemmouche had not only fought with the group, but had "tortured prisoners" and boasted of having committed worse atrocities[4].

But a wave of 'boomerang' acts of violence by other returning foreign fighters has nonetheless failed to materialise. The only other terrorist incident in Europe involving a veteran of the fighting in Syria was the much-publicised fracas in August 2015 on a high-speed train travelling from Belgium to France. A passenger discovered Ayoub al-Khazzani in the train's lavatory while the 26-year old Moroccan-born Spanish resident was trying to load a Kalashnikov assault rifle. A scuffle ensued as other passengers tackled and disarmed al-Khazzani, who was also carrying a pistol, nearly 300 rounds of ammunition, a Molotov cocktail and a box cutter. Already on the watch lists of at least four European security services because of his "ties to hard-line Islamist groups" and "connection to radical mosques in Spain", al-Khazzani is believed to have travelled to Syria in 2014 where he was trained by, and fought for, ISIL[5]. Accordingly, at a time when the United States and its NATO allies are deathly tired of the ongoing wars on terrorism, when their cemeteries and hospitals are already populated by a new generation of battle casualties, when their treasuries are drained by fourteen years of global skirmishes and outright warfare, and, when defence and intelligence budgets are either declining or mostly flat[6], it is tempting to regard the potential foreign fighters boomerang effect as exaggerated, if not perhaps alarmist.

But there are also good reasons to heed FBI Director Comey's warning and resist being lulled into the false sense of security that the paucity of actual returning foreign fighter incidents to date suggests. In this respect, an especially virulent concatenation of ideology and ambitions, strategy and sheer numbers that is the heart of the current terrorist threat posed by ISIL argues compellingly against being drawn into the complacency of denial.

To assess the threat of a foreign fighters boomerang effect, this paper considers both sides of the argument. To do so, it describes the unprecedented constellation of characteristics that define ISIL and thus potentially sheds light on the prospects of the current

violence in the Levant and Iraq spreading further afield to Europe, North America and Australia.

ISIL, ISIL über alles

The threat posed by ISIL has often been dismissed in the past—often with dire consequences. Less than six months after President Obama denigrated ISIL as a second-rate security concern[7], for example, the group's fighters stormed into Iraq, conquered half that country, resurrected the Caliphate, declared itself a state, and set about to slaughter and enslave thousands of Christians, Shia, and members of other Islamic minority sects. Organised into battalion-sized assault forces, the ISIL units effortlessly routed approximately 30,000 US-trained Iraqi soldiers. As the defenders fled, they left behind approximately three military divisions' worth of equipment[8], including US-made Humvees and M1 Abrams tanks, totalling tens of millions of dollars—which ISIL gleefully absorbed into its burgeoning arsenal[9]. It had previously seized similarly large stockpiles of weapons, equipment and cash from the Assad regime's military forces while fighting in Syria.

In addition to its conventional military capabilities, ISIL also has demonstrated an embryonic capacity to function as a legitimate governing entity[10]. Avoiding the mistakes and excesses of its earlier incarnation as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), ISIL has heeded Ayman Al-Zawahiri's advice from 2005 about winning the support of local populations by establishing legitimate Islamic governance[11]. In several cities across Syria and western Iraq, ISIL has now become *the* local government, mediating disputes, regulating and overseeing the produce sold at local markets, guarding against price gouging and organising a variety of community events[12]. In Minjib, for instance, ISIL's play for exclusive control led to war with the Kurdish faction. ISIL prevailed and installed an even more robust government, providing everything from medical services to courts and bakeries[13]. ISIL's strict laws and swift, impartial justice over the territory it controls also quickly imposed peace and order. It has thus attracted many followers by providing a better alternative to the lawlessness and corruption typical in Free Syrian Army (FSA)-controlled areas or elsewhere in Syria and in Iraq under the respective rules of Bashar al-Assad and Nuri al-Maliki[14]. The most common praise heard for ISIL in these regions is that, right or wrong, they are more honest and efficient than either the Syrian or Iraqi Baathists or the democratically-elected Iraqi governments

have been. ISIL has also made a point of punishing its own members if they commit unsanctioned crimes against the population. It also tries to empower existing local leaders and avoid micromanagement, if possible[15].

Further, unlike most terrorist groups, ISIL actually possesses its own means of income generation and financing. ISIL controls oil fields in the regions it governs which reportedly yield an estimated revenue of up to USD 2 million per day[16]. ISIL sells its oil on the black and gray markets using a complex network to smuggle oil to surrounding states, including Turkey and even the Assad regime in Syria[17]. Since August 2014, US and coalition airstrikes have reportedly reduced ISIL's income from oil and petroleum products significantly—but not critically[18]. One recent report from the region described ISIL's petroleum enterprise as "a sprawling operation almost akin to a state oil company that has grown in size and expertise despite international attempts to destroy it". So precious is this source of vital revenue to the group that it goes to great lengths to protect it. Oil wells are heavily guarded and patrolled and defended by protective sand berms and other physical security measures. ISIL's secret police, the *Amniyat*, oversee all aspects of production and distribution: according to one account, in order to "ensure revenues go where they should—and mete out brutal punishments when they do not[19]".

One of ISIL's largest sources of revenue, however, is war spoils, including millions of dollars' worth of captured US equipment abandoned by the Iraqi military. ISIL has also collected at least USD 20 million in ransoms paid for the return of European hostages it seized and held captive. The group's extensive extortion rackets, targeting citizens living in or visiting the region, reportedly bring in an additional several million dollars per month. Finally, ISIL profits from numerous other criminal activities including smuggling, human trafficking and robbery. One widely circulated report stated that ISIL stole over USD 430 million from the Iraqi Central Bank in Mosul[20]. However, subsequent questions have been raised about the veracity of these claims[21].

In addition, ISIL forces the citizens of its conquered territories to work as common labourers and imposes economic and agricultural regulations to maximise profits[22]. It also makes millions of dollars from *zakat*, or Islamic alms (calculated as a percentage of savings, assets, commodities, and profits), paid to ISIL by populations under

its control[23]. ISIL's control of electrical plants and other essential services allows it to levy additional taxes on any companies or individuals that wish to enjoy uninterrupted service[24]. Local activist groups have even claimed that ISIL has made a secret deal to provide electricity and natural gas supplies to Syria[25]. Another source of income is outright confiscations and theft. Donations from foreign sponsors and wealthy members provide a comparatively small portion of the income.

All this is in service to ISIL's goal of re-creating the Islamic Caliphate where fundamentalist, Sunni Islam is the only accepted religion and where Sharia, the legal system based on Islamic religious precepts drawn from the Quran and Hadith, is the only law. In resurrecting the Caliphate, ISIL aims to redraw the map of the Middle East, erasing the artificial states and borders created by the Western powers following World War I and resurrecting the Islamic empire that once stretched from Spain across North Africa, through the Middle East and the Caucasus, into South and Southeast Asia. Unlike other Islamic movements that accept or tolerate co-existence with various minority sects of Islam and sometimes even non-Islamic religions, ISIL offers no compromise and identifies its enemies as the West, Christians, Jews, puppet Arab regimes, Sufis, Druze, Kurds, Alawites, Yazidis and other Islamic minority sects along with Iran and all Shia Muslims. ISIL claims that it is currently fighting to protect the oppressed Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria.

In contrast to its rigid ideology and extreme interpretation of Islamic law, ISIL's organisational structure is remarkably flexible and fluid. Modern terrorist groups have generally found it beneficial to adopt a flatter, more linear and looser structure, as opposed to the top-down hierarchical, pyramidal command-and-control organisational entities that once predominated. The core around which this flexible structure extends in ISIL's case is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIL's self-proclaimed Caliph, and the leadership council comprised of al-Baghdadi's most trusted advisors. Al-Baghdadi also relies on a personal cabinet that includes specialists in the areas of finance, recruitment and media relations. Under al-Baghdadi are two deputies: one for Syria and the other for Iraq. Under each of these deputies are roughly a dozen local leaders. According to ISIL documents acquired by US intelligence, many of these local leaders were former officers from Saddam Hussein's army[26].

ISIL has also appropriated Al-Qaeda's ideology and strategy and thus portrays itself as the most faithful embodiment and effective agents of bin Laden's core goals and vision. It is therefore not surprising to find that there are deep ideological commonalities between ISIL and Al-Qaeda that have shaped the former's strategy and explain why it was so intent on declaring the resurrection of the Caliphate and establishment of the so-called Islamic State in June 2014. Like Al-Qaeda, ISIL sees itself and its fighters defending all Sunnis against an array of aggressive predators, including: apostate Iraqi and Lebanese Shia, Iran, the US and the West. ISIL also shares Al-Qaeda's unmitigated animus towards the Western liberal states system and especially democracy—which it has derided as that "wicked methodology[27]". ISIL patently thinks and acts strategically—having basically stolen the seven-stage strategy to victory first articulated by Al-Qaeda's operational chief, Saif al-Adl, in 2005. ISIL is currently at the fifth stage along this path—which explains last summer's pre-emptive declaration of the Caliphate. These stages comprise:

- The *Awakening Stage* (2000–2003), which coincided with the 11 September 2001 attacks, and is described as "Reawakening the nation by dealing a powerful blow to the head of the snake in the US";

- The *Eye-Opening Stage* (2003–2006), which unfolded after the US invasion of Iraq and was allegedly designed to perpetually engage and enervate the US and the West in a series of prolonged overseas ventures;

- The *Rising Up and Standing on the Feet Stage* (2007–2010) involved Al-Qaeda's proactive expansion to new venues of operations, as in West Africa and the Levant;

- The *Recovery Stage* (2010–2013), which was originally intended to allow Al-Qaeda to consolidate its previous gains and catch its breath, but which ended up having to be adjusted in light of both bin Laden's killing and the exploitation of new opportunities created by the Arab Spring to topple apostate regimes, especially in Syria;

- The *Declaration of the Caliphate Stage* (2013–2016) when Al-Qaeda will achieve its ultimate goal of establishing trans- or supra-national Islamic rule over large swaths of territory

in the Muslim world. ISIL has clearly stolen a march on Al-Qaeda in this respect;

- The *Total Confrontation Stage* (2016–2020) will occur after the Caliphate has been created and an Islamic Army commences the final "fight between the believers and the non-believers";

- The final, *Definitive Victory State* (2020–2022), when the Caliphate will ultimately triumph over the rest of the world[28].

It is indeed disturbing to map the accuracy of this strategic trajectory dating from 2005 to the present and to realise that, from ISIL's vantage point, the movement is right on schedule in having declared the Caliphate in June 2014. Moreover, no matter how half- (or even quarter-) baked ISIL's grandiose pretensions in this respect may be, the fact remains that propaganda does not have to be true: it only has to be believed. For ISIL's followers, sympathisers and supporters, its fulfillment of this seven-stage strategy presents a compelling narrative of achievement and attainment—thus accounting for ISIL's continued appeal and the convincing message that it effectively propagates.

> *...propaganda does not have to be true: it only has to be believed.*

The temptation to dismiss these developments as primarily a 'local' phenomenon—confined to the perennially violent, unstable Levant—is further belied both by the growing number of ISIL branches or 'provinces', its recruitment of an estimated 25,000 foreign fighters[29], and its continued efforts to radicalise a worldwide stable of stay-behind amateurs, whom the group encourages to carry out low-level, lethal attacks in their respective homelands. To date, ISIL has established bases in at least a half-dozen countries: stretching from West and North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and from the Sinai to South Asia and the Caucasus. Over the past year alone, ISIL-inspired home-grown attacks have occurred in the US, Australia, Canada, France and Belgium.

The call to violence from ISIL's chief spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, has proven much more effective in inciting random acts of violence worldwide than more than a decade's worth of similar Al-Qaeda's entreaties to achieve the same end[30]. Absolutely seminal in this respect was al-Adnani's clarion call on 22 September 2014 to would-be and actual ISIL supporters to carry out independent, self-directed acts of violence against ISIL's enemies in their own countries and homelands. "Do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be", al-Adnani declared in this statement, titled, "Indeed, Your Lord Is Ever Watchful[31]":

> *You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the [unbelievers]. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers...*
>
> *If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him... If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops*[32].

Some individuals have answered al-Adnani's call in their own countries on their own initiative, while others have been explicitly guided by ISIL operatives, either in person or over the Internet and social media[33]. The group thus clearly seeks to animate, motivate and inspire individuals to commit acts of terrorism either directly on ISIL's behalf or in concert with, and support of, ISIL's ideology and broader political goals.

ISIL, for instance, has claimed responsibility or affiliation with two lone-actor attacks that took place in Canada in October 2014. The attackers in both incidents had direct contact with ISIL and had sought to leave Canada to become foreign fighters with ISIL in Syria and Libya before deciding instead to carry out entirely domestic terrorist attacks[34]. ISIL also claimed responsibility for the September 2014 attack in Melbourne, Australia, where a man stabbed two police officers after being summoned for questioning in connection with his public display of an ISIL flag[35]. Finally, ISIL claimed credit for the series of attacks by a hatchet-wielding perpetrator in Queens, New York City in October 2014, who was subsequently found to have large amounts of jihadist material in his home[36].

> *The call to violence from ISIL's chief spokesperson ... has proven much more effective in inciting random acts of violence worldwide than more than a decade's worth of similar Al-Qaeda's entreaties to achieve the same end.*

In sum, the size, weapons and tactics of ISIL forces, combined with their ability to seize and hold terrain and exercise governance (however crude) are arguably unique in the annals of terrorism. Accordingly, ISIL (and perhaps also Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen) is now as capable, if not more, than some of the conventional militaries of established nation-states in the region. Like their government counterparts, this hybrid force holds territory, controls populations, conducts business and enforces laws. ISIL has already defied predictions and exceeded expectations. It has shown itself to be more brutal, lethal and unconstrained than perhaps any sub-state actor since Cambodia's Khmer Rouge. In the circumstances, given its barbaric practices, sadistic executions, and unmitigated violence, is it even conceivable that ISIL would display any reluctance to dispatch foreign fighters back to their homelands to undertake future terrorist attacks? The previous recitation of ISIL excesses and lethality suggest not; but some analysts, while conceding that such a threat exists, downplay its likelihood and frequency.

Today's foreign fighters: An exaggerated threat?

The paucity of foreign fighter incidents to date supports the arguments posited by Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro in their November 2014 Brookings Institution study. While conceding that the threat of foreign fighters returning to commit terrorist acts in Western countries exists, Byman and Shapiro nonetheless believe that it is exaggerated. Based on extensive interviews with government officials and experts in the UK, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey, the two analysts identified a half-dozen reasons why the potential threat posed by these veterans is less significant than is often otherwise assumed:

- First, many are killed in combat or used as cannon fodder and thus never get the opportunity to return home;
- Second, many choose never to return—simply remaining in the Islamist utopia that ISIL claims to have created in the territory it rules or else moving on to some other struggle elsewhere;
- Third, they are motivated less by anti-Western animus than by either a desire to kill Shia and defend their fellow Muslims or are responding to ISIL's eschatological summons to partake in the final apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil prophesised to occur at Dabiq, Syria;
- Fourth, many quickly become disillusioned with life in Syria or Iraq under ISIL, bemoaning their treatment and living conditions, thus returning home dejected and less violently-inclined than when they departed;
- Fifth, the training they receive from ISIL is in conventional warfare and not terrorism and therefore their newly acquired skills do not easily translate into the operational requirements of planning and executing terrorist attacks back home; and,
- Sixth, their obsession with social media means that they are often easy to identify and track and therefore are either arrested when they return or closely monitored by authorities[37].

Thomas Hegghammer reached a similar conclusion in his study of Islamist foreign fighters hailing from Europe, North America and Australia between 1990 and 2010. His research, which was concluded some years before the rise of ISIL, revealed that "no more than one in nine foreign fighters returned to perpetrate attacks in the West". According to Hegghammer, a majority of recruits in his sample left their native or adopted homelands with no intention of coming back to engage in terrorism. But, significantly, he also found that the small number who do return and do commit attacks in their native or adopted homelands had become both more capable and more lethal terrorists as a product of their overseas training[38].

A critical additional point in understanding why the threat of returning foreign fighters may be lower than is often presumed dovetails with Byman and Shapiro's contention that the majority perish overseas in combat. In testimony last year before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, the State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iran and Iraq, Brent McGurk, cited US government data that the majority of ISIL's suicide bombers are foreigners[39], thus further eroding their ranks—and eliminating the risk of their coming home to engage in terrorism.

The new generation of foreign fighters—A clear and present danger

As compelling as the above arguments may be, they are overshadowed by the vast scope of ISIL's ambitions, the extraordinary number of foreign fighters answering its battle call and the movement's professed ideology and strategy which embraces divinely-ordained, ongoing struggle along with an intensification of its confrontation with an array of enemies including the Shia, Iran, the Assad regime, Russia, Israel, the US and the West. It is this lethal combination that has arguably hitherto not constrained the group in anything that it has done—and indeed accounts for its repeated, documented use of chemical weapons[40].

The number of foreign recruits fighting under ISIL's aegis already exceeds by a factor of ten the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq at even the height of the war there a decade ago. According to the US House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, the number of volunteers for ISIL who have arrived in Syria and Iraq by

fall 2015 was alone more than three times the number recorded in 2014. Although the majority still come from the Middle East and North Africa (with Tunisia, ironically the only country where the promise of the democratic reforms raised by the Arab Spring appears to have taken root), some 4,500 come from Europe, North America and Australia. Their ranks include nationals from some 80 countries around the world[41]. Among them was Omar Abdul Azis of Indonesia, the son of Imam Samudra, one of the terrorists convicted of the 2002 Bali bombings[42].

What this means is that in just four years, ISIL's international cadre has already equalled even the most extravagant estimate of the number of foreign fighters that the US Intelligence Community believes had travelled to Afghanistan during the 1980s[43]. Viewed from another perspective, more foreign nationals have been trained by ISIL and other radical Islamist groups in Syria than were trained by Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan during the five years preceding the 9/11 attacks[44]. The situation in Syria today thus creates the same conditions, but on a far greater scale, that led to Al-Qaeda's rise and the attacks on New York and Washington.

These numbers alone are disturbing. Even if one accepts the arguments of Byman and Shapiro and Hegghammer that the potential boomerang effect of foreign fighters returning to carry out terrorist attacks in the West may be lower than the conventional wisdom suggests, the vast pool of recruits drawn to Syria affords ISIL and any of the other militant Islamist groups active there a surfeit of potential terrorists to cherry-pick and potentially dispatch back home to carry out attacks. As Director Comey noted, Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s provides a clear template for this eventuality. The 9/11 Commission Report's conclusion in this respect is revealing. "Thousands flowed through" bin Laden's camps before the 11 September attacks, it states, but "no more than a few hundred seem to have become Al-Qaeda members". Indeed, this small number, hand-picked from the larger crop, were subsequently screened, vetted and having been deemed "worthy", were confidently provided with subsequent, specialised terrorist training that enabled them to complete their assigned missions[45]. In this respect, Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger argue that "the soaring numbers of foreign fighters in Syria generally, and in ISIS specifically, point... to an increased risk of terrorism that could linger for years[46]".

ISIL has long cast a deliberately wide net in its recruiting practices, thus providing it with a larger and richer pool of more diverse foreign fighters to draw from and potentially assign to specialised tasks much like Al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan during the years leading to the 2001 attacks. ISIL, like the old Al-Qaeda, attracts and accepts devout Muslims; but it critically also actively recruits recent converts, opportunists, profiteers, sadists and adventure or thrill seekers—essentially anyone who can contribute to the cause. Their recruits and supporters are arguably "further down the path towards ideological radicalisation or more inclined by personal disposition towards violence," than those of other jihadist terrorist groups[47].

In this respect, ISIL's most fundamental appeal is based on a profound sense of catharsis, empowerment and satisfaction derived from striking a blow at a hated, predatory oppressor. ISIL's core propaganda messages invoke the same justifications of self-satisfying violence articulated by Franz Fanon in the 1950s during Algeria's struggle for national liberation from France. "At the level of individuals", Fanon famously explained, "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores self-respect[48]".

> *...ISIL's most fundamental appeal is based on a profound sense of catharsis, empowerment and satisfaction derived from striking a blow at a hated, predatory oppressor.*

ISIL effectively propagates this message through the Internet and social media to speak directly to its international audience, thereby preventing the foreign press from misinterpreting or otherwise distorting this basic message[49]. Their grisly propaganda videos of brutal executions, for instance, attract many more viewers than bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri's comparatively staid videos recanting complex theological treatises or imparting didactic philosophical and historical lectures[50]. Through these means, the group is able to tailor its messages to specific target audiences. One of ISIL's particularly effective means of attracting foreign fighters is its visual depictions of heinous acts of violence that not only arrest the attention of this audience, but helps motivate and inspire them to join ISIL's struggle[51]. "Ultraviolence", Stern and Berger observe,

"sold well with the target demographic for foreign fighters—angry, maladjusted young men whose blood stirred at images of grisly beheadings and the crucifixion of so-called apostates[52]". This also shows why one of the main sources and mechanisms for ISIL recruitment has been prisons, which also serve as training academies and safe locations for indoctrination and planning[53].

ISIL also attracts some of its recruits much in the same way as cults like Branch Davidian, Reverend Moon or Charles Manson[54]. This helps explain why ISIL is able to pique the interest of such diverse adherents as the two Austrian teenagers, 17-year-old Samra Kesinovic and 15-year-old Sabina Selimovic, who ran away from home to join ISIS's jihad in Syria[55]. ISIL also kidnaps children and brainwashes them in the ideology of violent Jihad. When these children are offered their freedom, many of them choose not to leave[56].

ISIL of course also relies on more traditional methods of recruiting. It appeals to Muslim fundamentalists by citing historical references; claiming to be the descendants of pious families of ancient, respected, lineage and stature; or the messengers and executors of apocalyptic prophecies. All of these themes have a very powerful effect on Muslim communities familiar with these stories and traditions[57]. Its eschatological messages in particular, Will McCants writes, has greatly "invigorated" the group, accounting for "the inrush of foreign fighters to Syria, many of them seeking a role in the End-Time drama[58]".

Conclusion

One does not have to speculate terribly much to see the potential threat from ISIL to the West given its vast cadre of foreign fighters native to, or previously resident in, those countries. This unprecedented pool of foreign recruits suggests that ISIL would certainly have the capability to undertake Mumbai-style attacks, modelled on the simultaneous assaults and running gun battles that occurred in that Indian city in November 2008. Given that ISIL has already established clandestine logistical support bases in Turkey, the prospect of some of its fighters piling into a car, with a trunk-full of Kalashnikov assault rifles, hand grenades and RPGs, and driving into the European Union undetected is not outside the realm of possibility. It is also not difficult to imagine a less complex operation—such as that mounted by the Somali jihadist terrorist

group, Al-Shabaab, in September 2013 that targeted Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Centre—occurring in some European city or suburb. Either type of attack would be well within the grasp and capabilities of ISIL fighters. The ISIL-linked plots that the FBI disrupted in the US on 4 July 2015 suggest that the threat of shopping mall attacks arguably extends to North America as well.

> *This unprecedented pool of foreign recruits suggests that ISIL would certainly have the capability to undertake Mumbai-style attacks...*

Any notion that this potentiality has not already been pursued by the Islamist terrorist organisations operating in Syria was put to rest by US journalist Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis) who spent two years in Syria as a hostage of ISIL's rival, Jabhat al-Nusra. In his account published last year in the *New York Times,* Padnos related how:

> *The Nusra Front higher-ups were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway back home*[59].

Given the symmetry between ISIL's ideology and strategy with Al-Qaeda's, a Mumbai-style type of attack in Europe or elsewhere in the West would also have the attraction of fulfilling bin Laden's 2010 wish to stage these type of assaults across Europe. Nor can attacks along the lines of the 7 July 2005 London suicide bomb attacks on mass transit—including subways, trains, buses, and the commuter stations for each—be ruled out. Subsequent plots along the same lines have already been thwarted at least twice in recent years—in Barcelona in January 2008 and New York City in September 2009. Conventional bomb attacks against mass transit that do not involve suicide bombers are indeed also possible—much as occurred in Madrid in March 2004 and two years later in Mumbai. And, in addition to the threat from skilled, trained terrorists, there is also the prospect of continued attacks perpetrated by lone actors or cells of individuals banding together to carry out entirely self-generated and self-directed incidents in their home countries.

The threat of a chemical weapons attack targeting civilians elsewhere in the Middle East or in Europe as well has to be considered in respect of ISIL's repeated recent use of these agents in Syria, often against civilian populations. There are already indications of ISIL's interest and ambition to obtain a variety of nerve agents, poison gases and other harmful toxins for use as weapons. For example, in May 2013 Iraqi authorities arrested an ISIL cell in Baghdad overseeing the production at two factories of sarin and mustard blistering agents[60].

> *...Al-Baghdadi's death would likely pave the way for a rapprochement producing a combined terrorist force perhaps of epic proportions.*

Finally, there is the prospect of a grand bargain and reconciliation between ISIL and Al-Qaeda which would profoundly change the current conflict and result in a significantly escalated threat of foreign fighter terrorist operations in the West. As recently as early 2014, the conventional wisdom inside Washington's Beltway was that the bloody split between Core A-Qaeda and ISIL would consume, neutre, and ultimately destroy them both. As the conventional wisdom on Al-Qaeda has rarely been correct anyway, it is not surprising that this, too, proved to be little more than wishful thinking. Indeed, efforts to re-unite are continuous from both sides—as Al-Zawahiri alluded to in a recent, public statement. Significantly, ISIL propaganda has always been deeply respectful of Al-Qaeda: referring to its soldiers, emirs and sheikhs in a positive manner and continuing to glorify bin Laden's accomplishments. The main impediment to reconciliation, however, is the strong personal enmity and vicious rivalry between al Baghdadi and Al-Zawahiri. Hence, Al-Baghdadi's death would likely pave the way for a rapprochement producing a combined terrorist force perhaps of epic proportions.

Fifty-four years ago, Jean-Paul Satre warned of the boomerang effect in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. "It is the moment of the boomerang", he observed, a new phase "of violence; it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realise any more than we did the other times that it's we that have launched it''. More than half a century later, we are again confronted by the boomerang—this time from a core of battle-hardened terrorists drawn from the thousands of foreign fighters

trained and commanded by ISIL who may at this very moment be awaiting orders to deploy back to their homelands.

The future of jihadism in the Middle East

Chapter 2 – The future of jihadism in the Middle East

The future of jihadism is looking bright. A threshold appears to have been crossed whereby the response to the mounting jihadist threat perpetuates and exacerbates the very causes of the phenomenon in a self-reinforcing loop.

> *...the worse the situation becomes, the more a deteriorating status quo appears to enjoy support from key players and constituencies.*

The ever-expanding recourse to airstrikes is destroying more and more of the region's urban landscape and disrupting its social fabric. Entire cities are being wiped off the map, with millions put on the roads and driven into extremes of desperation. Much needed humanitarian aid is increasingly in short supply, unlike chauvinism and discrimination. The spread of militias, at the expense of conventional armies, is fuelled by an all-out arms race and promises to undermine existing states and further, what has become a system of radicalisation in the region. Military operations are repeatedly carried out with little thought given to an eventual political normalisation or economic recovery. Paradoxically, jihadist threats have often become a pretext not to address any of its enabling political and socio-economic factors: the worse the situation becomes, the more a *deteriorating status quo* appears to enjoy support from key players and constituencies.

A mutating phenomenon

Meanwhile, the jihadist movement is reinventing itself to take full advantage of the shifting context. To fully understand this dialectic transformation and its future prospects, we must first start by winding the clock back to the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. Its features were the exact opposite of the phenomenon we face today. A well-defined struggle against the Soviet occupation drew small numbers of foreign volunteers, whose state-sponsored transfer into an extremely hostile environment was the culminating point of an intense ideological itinerary.

The second stage in this cursory chronology of the jihadist movement is its emancipation from state support and re-centring on to the Arab world. In the 1990s, small jihadist cells metastasised across the region. They developed around "Afghan Arabs", whose charisma is steeped in theological credentials and military experience. Having returned to their respective homelands, they redefined the enemy as the authoritarian regimes they lived under, but failed to gain traction other than in Algeria and Egypt, where their resounding defeat blunted their potential elsewhere. In parallel, the post-Soviet order in Afghanistan helped incubate the highly hierarchical, media-driven, global jihad known as Al-Qaeda, conceptualised by Osama bin Laden and climaxing with the suicide attacks of 11 September 2001.

A third chapter was opened with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which, by toppling a failed regime in a country already broken by deep trauma and endless international sanctions, created a first, genuine vacuum in the Arab world for the jihadist movement to seep into—a foreshadowing of voids to come a decade later. Initially, its leading figures hailed from the "Afghan Arab" generation, who carved out a space for themselves through a combination of assets: the prestige recently acquired (and soon to be lost) by Al-Qaeda; the media savvy that characterised the latter; the spectacular use of suicide missions giving jihadists with an edge over mainstream opposition armed groups; and other effective asymmetric tactics honed in Afghanistan, such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the creative use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), etc.

The jihadist movement ultimately self-destructed, however, as a result of several deleterious dynamics. First, although it lured into battle a stream of foreign volunteers from the region and the Muslim world, it capitalised on their presence only as fodder for suicide bomb attacks. Mostly incompetent as fighters, they were seen as too costly to host, train, equip and manage. The difficult trek to Iraq thus proved disappointing to those seeking a more romantic adventure, reducing the movement's overall magnetism. Second, the horrendous forms of violence jihadists publicised had yet to enjoy a broad audience, as they do today for reasons that will be discussed below. Third, the shift away from fighting the United States, the 'far-enemy' prioritised by bin Laden, to neighbouring Shiite 'apostates', may have galvanised Sunni co-religionists, but it also pitted them against an opponent that was

deeply rooted, unlike Soviet and US occupation forces, within local society.

Fourth, and most important, the quick-paced turnover internal to the jihadist movement—a consequence of systematic US targeting of its leaders—led to the replacement of an experienced cadre by ever-younger, less legitimate and more aggressive figures, mostly of Iraqi descent, whose ferocity became involute. Lacking genuine religious or military credentials, they successfully imposed themselves through ultraviolence, which increasingly turned against their own immediate environment. The intimidation and indiscriminate killings of Sunni notables prepared the ground for the rebellion the US invested in as of 2007, and which became known as the 'Awakening'. All told, the jihadist movement then self-destructed.

The Syrian game-changer

Its revival since 2013, in both Iraq and Syria, is a consequence of a broad array of factors, which would take too long to unpack. Suffice it to say that the Syrian conflict turned the early Iraqi model on its head. The broad popular movement that developed against the Assad regime, and which the latter worked hard to radicalise, offered a huge potential reservoir of recruits. Damascus not only retreated from large swaths of its own country, but deployed extreme tactics, such as ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, usually reserved to attacking foreign territory, creating a domestic vacuum much greater still than what had existed in US-occupied Iraq. The unthinkable forms and levels of violence carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies have also trivialised the jihadists' own brutality in the eyes of many victims and on-lookers. Jihadists, having learnt a lesson from their Iraqi debacle, understand the need to both defeat any potential Sunni Arab rivals and placate surrounding society in areas where they seek to consolidate. Moreover, the prevalence of militias and consequent loss of faith in the "state" as a framework to project oneself in have helped the jihadists gain acceptance for lack of any clear alternative.

Another critically important change pertains to foreign volunteers. The trip to Syria is uniquely low-cost and low-risk. For those with money, living conditions on the ground are relatively permissive, by warzone standards. The digitalisation of the world creates a connected, wireless jihad, in which fighters (not unlike other

migrants) articulate on social media their own, gratifying self-image, easily communicate with like-minded kin back home, and can even hope to lure their good company to their side. Many appear to fire more tweets than bullets.

> *The unthinkable forms and levels of violence carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies have also trivialised the jihadists' own brutality in the eyes of many victims and on-lookers.*

The thin veneer of military expertise and religious background of many of the jihadists has led them to compensate through other means, and carve out a specific space for themselves through a combination of characteristic communication skills and uniquely unhindered sadism. Such eroticisation of violence is a symptom of their thoroughly uprooted, globalised, resentful and juvenile subculture, which has more in common with school shootings in the US than the jihadist movement as we have known it so far.

It is important to note, in this context, that some of the worst aspects of what has become known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are not necessarily imbued in a Middle Eastern or Muslim ethos. Besides, the pornography of violence forms in itself a system that brings together presumed enemies: take the amplifying, bi-partisan and contagious US cult of security, the revival of Europe's far-right parties, the testosterone-laden posturing of even mainstream leaders all too happy to 'strike' with no plan, the glorification of miserable armies by Arab regimes, the militia culture sweeping the region and encouraged enthusiastically by the likes of Iran, etc. All offer more or less the same, muscular, binary worldview that erases the complexities and anxieties of modern life, and posit self-righteous violence as an instant form of liberation and fulfillment.

A huge mistake in attempting to understand the jihadist movement today would be to analyse it in isolation of the broader context, and attempt to rationalise it by drawing on frameworks inherited from the past. The huge amount of interest generated by discussions presenting ISIL as the brainchild of some Baathist mastermind, tells us more about our pressing desire to find some convenient, clear-cut interpretation than it does about the topic at hand.

A truly novel phenomenon

ISIL, rather, introduces a new dynamic and sets an effective precedent, which will no doubt affect, if not reshape, the jihadist movement more broadly. A first jihadist 'success' in a crumbling Arab world is a turning point in and of itself. Although it may seem relatively easy to contain in places like eastern Syria and north-western Iraq, it would be naïve to underestimate the real threat it poses, due to its ability to adapt, replicate, scale up, inspire others and leverage its opponents' reactions to its advantage.

Among the more potent facets of its model, the latter are particularly worth a mention. ISIL appears less hierarchical, and more networked than any of its jihadist predecessors, notably Al-Qaeda. Although Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi serves as a figurehead, he does not appear to be trying to impose a clear doctrinal vision, unlike his forebears. Rather, he has constituted himself as a remarkably neutral figure—almost an artificial construct of a leader, making few statements, speaking with no accent, dressing as if he was keen to personify a caliph taken out of Arab popular culture, and generally following the flow more than striving to assert visibly his authority.

Under Baghdadi seems to operate a relatively flat network of commanders who both enjoy considerable autonomy and maintain a unexpected level of cohesiveness, presumably by way of intense interaction via modern communication tools. If Al-Qaeda evoked the 'franchise' metaphor, ISIL is more akin to UBER: digitally empowered entrepreneurship within a low-maintenance framework. Accordingly, it has shown an unusual ability to absorb pre-existing networks, such as residual state bureaucracies, Baath Party remnants and rogue tribes.

Consequently, it has proven to be remarkably non-ideological, regardless of its stately grand-standing, Islamist pretenses and uncompromising brutality. It has not theorised the notion of an 'Islamic state' beyond vague, inconsistent and impractical references to a mythicised early Islamic era. Symptomatically, it happily combines in a same sentence Iraq (a contemporary denomination) and Sham (an historical one), and clearly seeks consolidation in 'soft-belly' areas, rather than any expansion based on a territorial vision that would pit it against 'hard' enemies. It has made at best lackadaisical efforts to codify and justify its recourse

to violence, staged to maximise modern-life 'buzz' effects at the expense of any ethical underpinning. Its narrative boils down to simple categories, shorn of the elaborate theological trappings to which the jihadist movement until recently paid considerable attention.

> *If Al-Qaeda evoked the 'franchise' metaphor, ISIL is more akin to UBER: digitally empowered entrepreneurship within a low-maintenance framework.*

Its relative pragmatism is reflected in the diversity of its constituents, ISIL retaining a rare protean quality, enabling it to be many things to many different people. It is also discernible in the way it deals with its social environment. Although potential rivals, rising threats and vulnerable minorities are dealt with ferociously, the majority's passive support is sought. Thus a preoccupation with levels of governance unseen among past jihadist precedents, and a tendency to be somewhat more intelligible and less obstructive than their forebears and alternative power structures; by contrast with the opaque, arbitrary and predatory behaviours attributable not only to jihadists of old, but to enduring regime structures and other militias, ISIL makes clear what it wants and, having done so, lets people fend for themselves to a surprising extent.

The eroding superstructure

The so-called Islamic State's greatest potential is less to be found in its intrinsic features than in the evolution of its environment. The Middle East is undergoing massive transformation, part of which relates to a fast eroding 'superstructure'. The strategic landscape, in a region historically shaped, for better or worse, by foreign interferences, is in flux, with US policy lacking an organising paradigm; European neighbours in disarray; Russia aggressively joining the frey; the Palestinian issue on the back-burner; Iranian power rising; and key Arab capitals either wiped out or unclear how exactly to define their role.

Nation-states built around authoritarian security services, highly centralised infrastructure and personalised power, another critical component of the region's fabric, have either collapsed entirely or face virtually insurmountable challenges. Across the region, once

national forms of leadership are giving way to divide and rule tactics, according to which regimes abandon any ambition to forge genuine unity and seek legitimacy principally through the manipulation of domestic strife and the fear of collective breakdown. Meanwhile, kleptomaniac political and economic elites, who amassed immense fortunes by cannibalising the state, are indifferent to deteriorating basic services that have all kinds of knock-on effects on education, health, justice and so on.

> *The so-called Islamic State's greatest potential is less to be found in its intrinsic features than in the evolution of its environment.*

Subnational structures do not appear to constitute a workable alternative, given the dilapidation of most communal, tribal, professional and provincial frames of reference. Even the family construct is disrupted, with parents failing to serve as role models, children struggling to get married, kinship solidarity mechanisms stressed by skyrocketing needs, and a general sense of dislocation. The nihilism that defines today's youth in a country like Iraq, which appears ahead of the curve due to a succession of wars, gruelling international sanctions in the 1990s, the early bankruptcy of its regime and its precocious demise, should serve as a cautionary tale.

As the above dynamics corrode the superstructure, it is crucial to look into what is emerging to fill the gaps. Novel forms of leadership, organisation and governance, new narratives, however inchoate and shifting, are beginning to shape the region at least as much as legacies of the past. ISIL is but one example.

This in itself marks a dramatic change. For the first time, the jihadist movement does not derive from a top-down attempt at transforming society according to a programmatic vision, with results generally contained to the fringes: it is a bottom-up product of profound alterations in the region's socio-economic and political fabric. This poses the problem in an entirely different analytical light, calling for a much broader and more dynamic study of the conditions of its incubation.

Leveraging its opponents

Part of the challenge stems from ISIL's instinctive focus on provoking an emotional more than a rational response on the part of its adversaries. Its morbidly theatrical use of violence is tailored to do so. Because it emanates, precisely, from the malaise of both Arab and Western societies, it knows intuitively how to capitalise on our insecurities, hypocrisies and divisions. In a globalised, digitalised world, it is winning the war of media simply by bringing inordinate attention to itself.

By prompting absurd policies that wreak havoc among local communities while preserving and rewarding failing political orders, it leverages its opponents' might to further devastate the region's superstructure, and instill within its own purported base a deepening sense of injustice and victimhood.

Its greatest success has been to engage its enemies in what could be described as 'ritualised conflicts', which destroy everything but itself. While Western governments try to bomb themselves out of the embarrassment the so-called Islamic State causes them, the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran and most other governments around the region simply use the jihadist movement to pursue unrelated interests. A spectacular albeit motley array of players, forming by far the greatest de facto coalition of forces in history, is amazingly incapable of making a dent on what remains, all told, a lesser militia.

At each and every turn of a downward spiral, however, these players find in ISIL reason to continue with the same course of action. Then ISIL flies to their succour with some new display of perversity in the horror show it puts on, distracting from their collective and individual failures, and saving them from the kind of reset that would be needed to start addressing the host of problems that promise long life to the jihadi movement.

The jihadist digital empowerment revolution

Chapter 3 – The jihadist digital empowerment revolution

In the past four years, Western countries have witnessed a veritable explosion in jihadist activity. By even the lowest estimates, more Western Muslims have gone to Syria than to all previous foreign fighter destinations combined. Polls, Internet activity and other anecdotal evidence suggest there is more support for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) today than there ever was for Al-Qaeda in the 2000s. The number of attack plots is only marginally up, but still at their highest level since 2001.

A root cause of this development is the unprecedented freedom of operation that jihadist activists have enjoyed on the Internet since around 2010. After a period in the late 2000s during which jihadists were struggling to communicate safely online, they now operate with relative impunity on a range of stable platforms. This helps foreign fighter recruitment considerably by exposing more people to propaganda, offering better information about the logistics of joining and facilitating the 'bridgehead effect', whereby early movers inspire friends at home.

Explaining the jihadist renaissance

The sudden increase in foreign fighting and ISIL support in the West in the early 2010s—the jihadist renaissance for short—is a formidable social scientific puzzle. It happened so quickly that it cannot be explained by socio-economic change among Western Muslims, be it poverty, marginalisation or identity problems. It also cannot be ascribed to changes in jihadist ideology, which has stayed broadly the same for many years. Something else must have changed.

Many have rightly pointed to the sudden eruption of the Syrian war, whose features—its many civilian deaths, proximity to Europe or place in the Islamic apocalyptic tradition—made it a particularly attractive destination. Others have stressed the sudden lowering of constraints on foreign fighting, arguing that international support for the Syrian opposition and weak policing of the Syrian-Turkish border in the early years made Syria much easier to reach than other theatres of conflict. Yet others attribute the increase to ISIL's

propaganda efforts; ISIL is said to run a particularly sophisticated distribution apparatus and to produce particularly slick or impactful content.

All of these factors are probably important. Missing from the discussion, however, has been the dramatic change in the ability of activists to use the Internet for recruitment purposes. What is new today is not that jihadist use the Internet—they always did—but that they do so with greater ease and impunity than at any point in history. This 'digital empowerment revolution' coincided in time with the jihadist renaissance and has been a driver behind it.

Why it was not always this way

To appreciate the novelty of the situation, we must remind ourselves that seamless terrorist exploitation of the Internet is by no means a given. High-risk activists normally face two fundamental problems online: security and trust. To ensure that they do not get caught, hunted men must make sure that they are not tracked or monitored and that the people they interact with online are not spies. Security is hard to achieve because activists have incomplete information about the technology they are using. Trust is difficult to establish because of the so-called bandwidth problem (the absence of non-verbal communication cues, which makes it much easier to pretend being someone else). The more sensitive the communication exchange, the more acute the problems. Unilateral recruitment calls ("come to Syria everyone!") and general ideological chats ("I hate America"—"so do I") are not very sensitive because they are not illegal. Recruitment exchanges ("let's meet so I can introduce you to the brothers") and operational coordination ("you kill the guard and I lob the grenade") are much riskier to conduct online.

The extent to which terrorists experience trust and security problems is a function of technology and repression. New technologies can provide stealth or facilitate vetting. Weak online policing reduces the risk of getting caught. Because technologies come in bursts, we have historically seen a cat-and-mouse game between rebels and governments. When a new technology is introduced, rebels are digitally empowered for a while until governments catch up and roll back the rebels' gains.

The online operational freedom enjoyed by jihadist has therefore varied over time. A recent study documents a major shift in the sense of security and trust among online jihadist in the mid-2000s[61]. In the early 2000s, jihadist exploited digital technologies with relative ease. There were stable jihadist web sites, often registered under real names and sometimes displaying real contact details. In jihadist discussion forums, people felt secure enough to volunteer personal information that could reveal their location and identity, and counter-surveillance was not a major conversation topic. By the late 2000s, virtually all the static web sites were gone. In the forums reigned an atmosphere of paranoia; nobody revealed sensitive information, there were numerous posts about how to avoid surveillance, and rumours about infiltrators and honey-pot sites proliferated. It was rare to see specific information about how to link up with a militant group, and there was very little evidence of online recruitment transactions (in the sense of recruiter and recruit meeting first online and only after in real life). What had happened was that governments had realised around 2003-2004 that the web had become a safe haven and increased repression in the form of site take-downs, content monitoring, SIGINT collection, honey-pot sites and online undercover operations.

An unprecedented situation

Fast-forward to 2015. The static web sites are back again, more numerous than ever. Wordpress and Tumblr host hundreds of jihadist blogs, many of which offer specific advice about how to get to Syria. The forums are largely gone, but they have been replaced by Twitter and Facebook, where people regularly volunteer information (such as their location or photographs of their surroundings) that could in theory lead to their capture. On Facebook, especially, many write under their real names or poorly disguised pseudonyms, and everybody reveals their social network through their friends list. A plethora of apps such as Whatsapp and Kik allow for bilateral or small-group communication and are, by all accounts, being used for sensitive information exchanges. There is plenty of evidence of Internet-mediated recruitment exchanges. Compared with the late 2000s, online jihadists seem to have very few concerns about security or trust. It is only among active members of ISIL—the most at-risk subset of jihadists—that we see widespread interest in security-related advice.

It is not just the ability to exchange sensitive information that has increased. There has also been a quantum leap in the ability to project propaganda. In the past, viewing a jihadist video, for example, was a cumbersome process. You had to access a jihadist forum, locate the post, find a working download link (among the list of 20 to 50 displayed for redundancy), and then download from one of the file-sharing sites such as Megaupload (which were also used to distribute pirated music and porn). Today you just click a Youtube link or watch the video directly on one of the static sites such as Archive.org, Ansar Khilafa, or (until recently) Isdarat. Videos now also have much longer online lives, and they are all searchable, which they were generally not in the past.

Moreover, the availability of jihadist propaganda on mainstream sites like Youtube and Twitter has all but eliminated self-selection as a barrier to exposure. In the past, only people who actively sought out jihadist forums—ie, those who had already started a process of radicalisation—got to see jihadist propaganda. Today, YouTube may suggest a jihadist video for you in the right-hand column even if you search for something else, like "nashid" or "Badr". Twitter and Facebook will suggest friends for you, potentially bringing you into contact with radicals two degrees removed. Once you are connected to a jihadist sympathiser on Twitter, an ocean of jihadist propaganda is just a few clicks away.

Generally we have a situation where it has never been easier for jihadists to communicate among themselves and reach potential recruits. Activists are doing things online today that would almost certainly have had them arrested in the late 2000s. Governments have basically lost control over the jihadist Internet. How did this happen?

Causes

The first reason is technology. The late 2000s saw the rise of new communication platforms that were better designed for online social interaction and the exchange of audiovisual content than previous platforms, hence their name: social media. Some of them reached a scale that allowed for exceptionally wide distribution. Others were designed to allow for more limited audience, but more secure communication. Some of the platforms, such as Facebook, also have a design that reduces the trust problem, because it displays more complex information about the user and allows for

the accumulation of user information (ie, the building of reputations) over time. Not only did we get qualitatively different platforms, we also got *more* of them, which has probably stretched surveillance resources.

A second reason is that the new platforms were owned by large Western corporations. Jihadists paradoxically came to enjoy more stability and protection on social media than on the open Internet, even though the platforms were US-owned. The forums of the 2000s could be taken down, hacked, taken over or mimicked. The US National Security Agency cannot do the same to Twitter or Facebook for obvious legal reasons. The policing of these platforms—which are effectively small internets inside the Internet—was thus left to a *private* police force, namely, the companies themselves. The companies, however, have different incentives and skill sets than a regular intelligence service and have, despite their good intentions, manifestly failed to stem terrorist exploitation of their services.

A third factor is safe havens. In the early 2010s, for reasons linked to the Arab Spring, several jihadist groups established territorial safe havens, especially in Syria and Iraq, but also in Yemen, Libya and elsewhere. Thus in any digital communication between a jihadist group and a supporter in the West, one side would be out of reach. Unlike militants in late 2000s Waziristan, who had to limit Internet use in the field for fear of being droned, jihadist in Syria could communicate with the outside world at a much lower risk of harm.

A fourth factor has been the resource constraint on intelligence services. The three previous factors would not necessarily have produced a digital free-zone if the new challenges had been met with adequate policing. Instead, Western intelligence services were left to deal with a much larger problem with roughly the same resources. As a result, the interaction effect of the digital empowerment revolution and political developments left security services overwhelmed. The Syrian war created more candidate foreign fighters, who exploited the new technological opportunities and quickly became so many that governments could no longer police online jihadism as before. A new equilibrium emerged in which security services had to focus on the most acute security threats, leaving minor infractions (such as running a foreign fighter

blog) alone. In this new normal, the threshold for what will land an online jihadist into trouble is much higher than it was in the 2000s.

Effects

The effects of the digital empowerment revolution for jihadist recruitment are fairly intuitive. Let us examine the main ones to highlight the mechanisms involved.

First is the exposure effect, which is that jihadist today are able to expose a much larger population to their propaganda than was the case in the past. The scale and design of the new platforms, the elimination of the self-selection barrier and the general media coverage of groups like ISIL combine to make it almost impossible for a young Muslim *not* to see jihadist propaganda at some point in their adolescence. Of course, propaganda exposure alone is rarely enough to trigger radicalisation, but it helps.

Second is the information effect, which is that prospective recruits now have much better information about how to join than they had in the past. In the 2000s, there were no blogs that told you how to get to Waziristan, what to bring, what to look out for, or what to expect. Today you can easily find extremely detailed travel advice for Syria. This not only enables, it also helps to motivate, because it reduces uncertainty about the risks ahead.

Third is the bridgehead effect, by which early movers motivate their friends at home to join them by reporting what it is like in the field. This can take the form of private messages (sms, pictures, short videos), semi-private messages (Facebook and Instagram posts, Whatsapp messages, etc.), and open messages (blog posts, pictures, videos). This type of home reporting occurred in the 2000s as well, but on a much smaller scale than today. If you are on the fence with regard to joining, seeing a friend—or simply someone who looks and talks like you—join before you and do fine can tip the balance. This is the single most important recruitment mechanism for Western foreign fighters.

A fourth potential effect is that militants start using the web more systematically for operational coordination. This a much desired capability for any terrorist group—the Holy Grail of tactical advancements—because it reduces the need to meet physically and increases the ability to strike at long distances. However, it

requires very high levels of confidence in the technology and trust in your interlocutors, so it is relatively rare. If the current trend towards online lawlessness continues, we will see more and more operational coordination over digital platforms.

Conclusion

A fundamental driver behind the dramatic rise in jihadism in the past five years has been the opening up of a digital sphere where militants can operate with relative impunity. Contrary to popular perceptions, this situation is new and avoidable.

If governments want to stem radicalisation, they can and must do more to police the jihadist Internet. There is a need for an immediate, large-scale, multinational effort to take the Internet back from the jihadists. Such an effort will necessarily involve a multitude of measures, but one could start with low-hanging fruits such as taking down static web sites and blogs. Then one must work with social media companies to police their platforms better. Security services could use tried-and-tested methods such as infiltration and information operations to undermine interpersonal trust among jihadists online. Some challenges, such as encryption, are of a technical nature and cannot be solved by decree, but many others are a matter of political will and funding.

> *There is a need for an immediate, large-scale, multinational effort to take the Internet back from the jihadists.*

Of course, this is sensitive political territory, for everybody wants online privacy and nobody wants a thought police. There needs to be an open and informed debate about the premises for any such digital counter-offensive.

There are at least three reasonable arguments in favour or more online policing. The first is that much of what is going on online is already illegal, so for these phenomena we are only talking about enforcing existing laws. Second, there is arguably a difference between free speech and broadcasting. Few would argue that it is a human right to get air time on television to voice one's opinions. Why should it be on Twitter? Third, we are not talking about a

digital military coup, but a return to the situation of about 2010. It is not the policing that is new, but the lack of it.

Such a debate would benefit greatly from more openness on the part of the security services. Many citizens are opposed to online policing because they do not know the extent and nature of the problem. Security services should provide the public with detailed, real-life examples of the challenges they are facing.

Social media are but the latest in a series of technology shocks over the past twenty years which have helped temporarily subversive non-state actors communicate. In the past, governments caught up with online rebels and re-established a degree of authority. We must do the same again, or jihadism will continue to grow.

Foreign fighters and the Arab world

Chapter 4 – Foreign fighters and the Arab world

Although much of the attention on foreign fighters has focused on Westerners going to fight in Syria, the conflict has particularly inspired Sunni Muslims in the Arab world. Exact figures are elusive, but a US Congressional task force estimated that, conservatively, there were 25,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq as of September 2015. Up to 4,000 came from the United States, Australia, Western Europe and Canada; the rest came from Muslim-majority countries, particularly those in the Arab world. Few countries are spared: long-standing jihadist hotbed Saudi Arabia is again a reliable supplier of fighters as is neighbouring Jordan, but so too are countries farther from Syria and Iraq like Tunisia, Libya and Morocco. Several countries in the Arab world, notably Libya and Lebanon, face considerable risk of bleed-out from returning fighters and several more face more modest dangers, especially Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.

In all jihads, volunteers pick up skills, tactics, and ideas that they can then use in the next conflict; Syria and Iraq are no exception. In Afghanistan and post-2003 Iraq, foreign volunteers were hardened in battle, and in Iraq they learned how to construct increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs), developed assassination tactics and gained experience with the mass use of suicide bombings. In addition, the organisational style of 'hub' groups spread, and fighters also network, gaining contacts from outside their region and country and setting the stage for future cooperation. Technology and tactical transfers also occur more quickly thanks to foreign fighters.

Returnees often play an important role as recruiters. One study found that foreign fighters are often bridge figures—jihadist 'rock stars'—who radicalise new recruits to join the fight. More practically, returning foreign fighters are often key links for would-be fighters to find travel facilitators.

> *...returnees view problems differently at home after their return.*

Perhaps the most important change, but the one hardest to quantify, is the change in mindset. Volunteers come to a conflict

zone for many reasons, ranging from a sense of adventure to a desire to protect fellow Muslims. While in the conflict zone, however, they learn new ideas, often linking causes or expanding their range of enemies. Not surprisingly, returnees view problems differently at home after their return. Indeed, foreign jihadist organisations may 'seed' local groups, and groups like the Armed Islamic Group, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group and others were formed after foreign fighters returned home. Often these groups adopt a *takfiri* ideology; a highly intolerant strain of jihadism in which anyone who does not conform to 'correct' Islamic belief and practice—even rival Salafist jihadists, is labelled an apostate. Conflicts involving foreign veterans often shift from local to regional enemies.

Many foreign fighters, however, do not appear to pose a threat to their home country. Mitigating factors include the following:

- Many foreign fighters die in the conflict zone. Figures are rarely exact, but available data suggest a wide, but usually bloody, range. In Afghanistan before the attacks of September 2001, the rate was low, providing a skewed view of mortality if we rely on this experience;

- Many of those who volunteered and subsequently died were among the most zealous and adventurous potential jihadists at home. By going abroad, they drained energy and recruits from organisations at home in the short term; and

- Many fighters also become professional jihadists and do not return home, particularly if their home is not a hotbed of violence. Becoming a professional jihadist may stem from necessity more than conviction. Some fighters from Tunisia, for example, cannot return home as they know they will face arrest. The groups themselves may take volunteers' passports, making it difficult for them to return home, or the volunteers may burn it themselves.

- Another mitigating factor may be the local and regional focus of many jihadist groups. Part of what made Afghanistan and Pakistan such nightmares for international terrorism is that the group that was founded there ran camps there and was based there—Al-Qaeda—embraced a

global terrorism agenda. Yet Al-Qaeda is unusual in its focus on the United States and the West in general. Many jihadist groups in Syria do not prioritise Al-Qaeda's international agenda, although recent events seem to suggest that ISIL has added the West to its targeting list. The downing of the Russian plane in the Sinai (October 2015) and the multiple attacks in Paris (November 2015) confirm this new trend.

How well local security services respond can have a decisive impact. Upon return, strong security services can arrest foreign fighters, monitor them or otherwise make them less able to conduct attacks, seed new groups, serve as bridge figures to recruit new fighters locally, transfer tactics and ideas or link up with global networks. As the flow of foreign fighters to Syria increased in 2013 and as ISIL danger became a flood, Arab governments began recognising the risk and empowering their security services.

In areas where existing militants are active or states and their security services are weak, some returnees are more likely to take up arms. Such a move is even more likely if the returnees are not being integrated into society, if there are significant sectarian divide, and if important groups like ISIL see the country or its territory as a relative priority.

The humanitarian situation is likely to worsen. Returnees will have learned brutal tactics and some will have come to view civilians as legitimate targets, particularly religious minorities, but also those who work for or collaborate with whichever regime the particular fighters oppose. Returnees may also pass along methods like beheadings, which generate considerable publicity and are in vogue due to ISIL's popularity. They are also likely to target humanitarian NGOs.

Local rebels may change their orientation in several ways. Sectarianism remains the dominant narrative attracting foreign fighters to the Syria-Iraq conflict and apocalyptic sentiments are growing. When returnees come home, they bring this world-view back with them; this is already happening in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Here we may be on new ground. In the past, sectarian fights and other intra-Muslim struggles had less appeal than 'defensive' jihads like the one in Afghanistan against the Soviets and in Iraq against the US, which involved expelling a foreign

invader and had broad support among leading clerics. Sectarianism has now become mainstream. Indeed, sectarianism has become blurred with anti-foreign sentiment: Shia are seen as apostates and thus, like foreign-backed regimes, are deemed illegitimate. Iranian and Hezbollah ties to Shia communities give them a foreign dimension as well.

The return of highly motivated, well-trained fighters often transforms the military dynamics of a local conflict, often with mixed, long-term results. Returning jihadists are often more skilled fighters, or at the very least braver and willing to take more risks than they were before they left. The foreign fighters, even if their atrocities are few in number, they come with a reputation, magnified by social media, that makes them attractive to rebels endeavouring to carve out a more secure area or expand their territory. Returning foreign fighters may not be team players. The fighters may disrupt a local group's command-and-control structure. Over time, the returning fighters may distract existing groups from the focus on the local regime and create new enemies. The returnees are highly vulnerable to overreach. Because they tend to have a more regional focus, they often dissipate their attacks by striking multiple countries, thereby bringing in new enemies and failing to rally local populations. In many ways, foreign fighters help the government opposing them defeat rebels. Returnees' foreign ties, links to international terrorism and brutality increase support for governments—even brutal ones—and play into regime propaganda.

> *Returning jihadists are often more skilled fighters, or at the very least braver and willing to take more risks than they were before they left.*

Foreign fighters returning to their homelands are likely to change the prevalence and nature of terrorism in several ways. In general, returnees prefer insurgency to terrorism. Most foreign fighters are insurgents, and among Arab publics guerrilla war has more legitimacy than terrorism. Indeed, foreign fighters often compete with international terrorist groups, usually successfully, denying them resources. Yet some foreign fighters received training relevant to terrorism while overseas, and they will bring this knowledge home. As such, they are likely to increase terrorism as a by-product of revolutionary war. This will not usually involve

international terrorism, but it will involve attacks on regime targets and strikes on civilian areas in order to discredit the government. Terrorism on Western targets *in the region* is also likely to grow. Those who fight with ISIL imbibe its hostility to the West, both as a military enemy but also as a presence that ideologically is opposed to 'true' Islam. Kidnapping of Westerners for ransom is also likely, largely for financial reasons but also because of the publicity such actions bring.

> *Terrorism on Western targets in the region is also likely to grow.*

The bleed-out issue has important policy implications and is a significant potential threat to regional stability. Legal governments can reduce the risk of bleed-out by hindering the travel of volunteers and constraining their ability to organise; countering the narrative more effectively by stressing the internecine nature of the violence in the Sunni Muslim community; and developing effective de-radicalisation programs. Regional and international cooperation to monitor and disrupt travel is also valuable. Those same governments are also likely to take advantage of the jihadists' presence to gain more support from the United States, delay democratic reform, and crack down on non-jihadist opposition.

The intelligence ramifications are considerable. Improving intelligence sharing is vital for speedy action and Western countries can play an important facilitating role in this respect. Analysts should also seek to identify likely alternative locations to which foreign fighters might migrate, should their return home be prevented or simply because some fighters will go from jihad to jihad. From a counter-terrorism point of view, groups in Syria are highly vulnerable and can be persuaded to exclude or otherwise suspect foreign volunteers.

Foreign fighters from Europe

Chapter 5 – Foreign fighters from Europe

The numbers of European foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq to join *Daesh*[62] or Jabhat al Nusra are unprecedented. It is estimated that around 5,000 fighters from Western Europe have travelled to the region since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. While there are significant numbers of foreign fighters departing from France (1,262-1,700), Germany (600-760) and the United Kingdom (600-800), smaller EU states also see many of their citizens leave for Syria. Belgium is said to have 440 to 470 of its own in the region, the Netherlands 220 to 250, Denmark 125 to 150 and Sweden 180 to 300. Austria is believed to have 150 to 300 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, a potential consequence of its sheer geography abutting the Balkans, an important conduit[63].

Many foreign fighters return home disillusioned rather than committed to carrying out specific terror attacks on EU soil. That being said, there have been several attacks in Brussels and Paris in which attackers have shown operational connections to Syria and the majority of terror plans since October 2013 have been carried out by *Daesh* sympathisers.

This mixed operational picture is also made murkier by the lack of a common socio-psychological profile for foreign fighters. A kaleidoscope of motivational factors and interplay between pull and push factors create unique profiles to explain why single individuals leave their home country. Social media serves as a direct peer-to-peer instrument for propaganda and recruitment. Many foreign fighters have a criminal background and low income levels (except in UK); some come from dysfunctional families and have complex psychological issues, and many have limited future prospects. Some come from criminal gangs. However, some have advanced criminal or professional skill sets that can be used and exploited in conflict theatre. For example, Chechen recruits from Sweden have multiple trafficking and criminal connections throughout Europe reaching deep into the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Several territorial gang leaders in Denmark have joined the group, and some of its members become more dangerous when they return home.

All of these personal circumstances matter when it comes to what European foreign fighters do within the fold of *Daesh* in Syria and

Iraq. Their position within the network and their particular skill set matters greatly as to what they actually end up doing operationally in the field. There is a spectrum of both direct and indirect operational roles such as preachers, recruiters, facilitators, financiers and ordinary recruits without connections. Individual contact points and the ability to bring assets to the table greatly matter for the terrorist organisation.

Individual financing schemes help assist the greater ISIL cause and enhance an individual's station within the group. These involve extensive fraud activities like using shell companies to evade fiscal constraints. Often, recruits bring cash with them or transfer small amounts to money-service providers in border towns along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Personal connections within *Daesh* matter greatly to reach an important status. This is the case of recruits with extremely specialised, high-demand skills like engineers, as well as IT and media specialists to handle the production of videos. The staging and technical expertise seen in execution videos indicate that EU nationals are probably involved in the pre- and post-production work. Other profiles are highly sought after, as well, such as doctors or nurses who can serve in crucial administrative positions. These jobs are the most valued by ISIL recruiters after recruits willing to conduct martyrdom operations and other military missions. Often, EU nationals who speak the same language form specific contingents within *Daesh* to operate together.

Although most European foreign fighters are not drawn by financial benefits, most of them are paid almost twice as much as regular *Daesh* fighters. This can produce resentment over preferential treatment. The utility of the fighters without personal connections or particular skill set is usually to serve as cannon fodder, recruitment sergeants operating in Europe or propagandists. Many Europeans are sent on suicide missions or high-risk military operations. They are also used in specialised missions such as guarding Western hostages. There is an important gender distinction in that respect.

Young Western women marry male foreign fighters because local, clan and honour form barriers for marriage with locals. These women are often abused and vulnerable, reduced to raising the next generation of ISIL citizens. Older women play a mentoring role

and focus on the recruitment of other women back in Europe. Depending on their abilities and language, European women are often found in clerical work, especially attending to social media. The types of social media platforms utilised is increasingly moving to peer-to-peer, encrypted apps, including SureSpot, Telegram, Kik and other platforms. Europeans foreign fighters are particularly exploited for their innovative capacity and their ability to think creatively to boost propaganda that will resonate in the West. They have also spread new technological innovations in the battlefield. For example, quadcopter drones are increasingly used as command-and-control systems.

Relatively few Europeans reach high-ranking military positions within *Daesh* though there are exceptions within specific "regions" of the Caliphate. Instead, Jordanians, Tunisians and Chechens have assumed these high-ranking positions, especially given the latter's military experience.

Europeans under age and children are used for propaganda effect in execution videos. Other Europeans are assigned specialised functions such as running the moral police roaming the territories under control to enforce religious behaviour. There is also evidence that some European foreign fighters are involved in significant plundering or financial schemes that require intimate knowledge of income sources in the West.

Some European foreign fighters are involved in the logistics of travel and interaction between ISIL and the neighbourhood. Part of this involves the creation of safe houses along the border and transfer into Syria from Turkey. Many break up their travel, avoiding direct routes and travelling through the Balkans and Greece into Turkey, and then onward to Syria. There is also significant evidence that some are involved in humanitarian work, playing dual roles as care-giver and fighter. Many humanitarian organisations distribute aid in ISIL-controlled areas and must negotiate access to these areas. The extent of their involvement and how much aid actually goes to *Daesh* is open for question.

It is unlikely many European recruits are climbing the inner echelons of decision-making within *Daesh* but they perform many individual and important functions for the organisation, especially creating loopback mechanisms to supporters and infrastructure in the West. As such, there is constant travel and movement between

Europe and ISIL. It is said that few have actually left or rebelled. Almost none are allowed to leave the organisation of their own will, which means conditions are difficult inside *Daesh* in Syria and Iraq. Foreigners within *Daesh* have been regarded as prestigious and important for the terrorist organisation in order to mobilise outsiders through propaganda. The most hardened and ideologically committed recruits from Europe are still fighting and dying with *Daesh* in the region. Many of them will never return. The real challenge ahead will materialise when European foreign fighters start going back home in large numbers, committed and ready to seek revenge. The broad variation in experience and skill sets makes this a formidable challenge.

Foreign fighters from the North Caucasus in Syria and Iraq: Motivations and role

Chapter 6 – Foreign fighters from the North Caucasus in Syria and Iraq: Motivations and role

This chapter discusses the evolving role and motivations of North Caucasian fighters in the Syrian civil war and in Iraq. In order to assess clearly these elements, we first need to estimate the size of the North Caucasian contingent in these two countries. Assessments of the number of fighters from Russia, and more specifically from the North Caucasus, vary according to a number of sources. The Russian government and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) estimate that the number of insurgents from Russia involved in various insurgent factions is over a thousand individuals (1,700 in February 2015; 2,700 in October 2015). Other analysts have suggested that the number of fighters currently involved the region could easily top 3,000. The number of Russian-speaking fighters nonetheless remains relatively low compared to fighters from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco and other Arab countries. Very few North Caucasians have reached leadership positions in Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). That being said, they have played a much more active role in the Syrian civil war than European and other Western foreign fighters. Russian-speaking fighters have established powerful insurgent groups in Syria; they have extensive military experience and remained independent actors throughout the civil war. We can identify over time two waves of Russian-speaking fighters, each driven by different incentives and trajectories based on their transnational activism.

The first wave (2011–2013)

The first wave of fighters was mostly composed of ordinary Chechens living in Western Europe, as well as North Caucasian mid-level insurgent commanders associated with the Imarat Kavkaz (IK[64]) based in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. In the former group, a majority of individuals grew up in exile following the First and the Second Chechen Wars (1994–1996; 1999–2009). Many of them were initially hoping to join the fight against the Russian state in the North Caucasus; however, it was often easier and less risky for them to reach Syria than it was to access the North Caucasus. Furthermore, IK and its various factions in the North Caucasus have been unable to integrate successfully foreign fighters mostly

because of their limited logistical capacities and their inability to screen new recruits. For many of the early operatives, the main incentive to travel to Syria was to help a Muslim community under attack and gain experience that would later be used in the North Caucasus. The majority of these fighters were not known as particularly ideological jihadists even if they generally supported the IK and its struggle against the Russian state. At the same time, ordinary people in Chechnya and other republics in the North Caucasus did not move en masse to Syria because the Russian government imposed a system of controls on the relatives of foreign fighters.

For the insurgents associated with the IK who travelled to Syria in 2012, the Syrian jihad represented a survival strategy rather than a deliberate choice. After violent incidents at the border between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2012, IK insurgents based in the Pankisi Gorge might have been forced to flee abroad to avoid being persecuted and captured by Russian and Georgian forces. Syria was perceived as an easily accessible safe haven where militants could regroup and recover from Russian counter-terrorist operations. Furthermore, they perceived Syria as an opportunity to gain access to military training, as well as to create links with jihadist organisations across the Middle East. In this context, important IK leaders based in Turkey, like Isa Umarov, were instrumental in creating the organisational structure supporting Russian-speaking fighters in Syria. Acting as a transmission belt, they provided financial and logistical aid in order for fighters to reach Syria. As early as 2012, North Caucasian fighters became militarily active around Aleppo and subsequently created two major combat groups, Junud as-Sham and Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). These two North Caucasian units acquired a fierce reputation based on considerable military success during the battle of Aleppo, the battle for the Menagh Air base in August 2013 and the Latakia offensive in 2014. Until late 2013, JMA, under the leadership of Salahuddin al-Shishani and Abu Omar al-Shishani, acted as one of the main hubs for Caucasian volunteers. It was considered to be the Caucasus Emirate's satellite branch in Syria and was closely associated with Jabhat al-Nusrah. At the same time, the level of fragmentation and competition between different factions and individuals in Syria had led to growing tensions.

In the ideological and theological battle between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, the North Caucasian groups suffered an important schism. At the end of 2013, Omar al-Shishani and a few other North Caucasian fighters swore allegiance to ISIL and left JMA's rank. The majority of North Caucasian fighters remained associated with JMA and refused to join ISIL, as they perceived them to be too brutal and foreign to their own objectives. The group remained the IK's official branch in Syria under the leadership of Salahuddin al-Shishani, and pledged an oath of neutrality in the ideological clash between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL. Accordingly, one can observe two new contingents arising from amongst North Caucasus fighters in the region. The first was composed of IK loyal followers driven by ethno-religious views of jihad who remain associated with Salahuddin, JMA and other factions such as Junud as-Sham. These combatants continue fighting the Syrian regime, developing discreet alliances with local groups in order to insure their survival. On the other hand, takfirists and the more extremist factions amongst the Caucasian fighters joined ISIL and expanded their combat operations to northern Syria and Iraq. They became part of ISIL's rapid growth and spectacular military victories in the summer of 2014. On that basis, Omar al-Shishani and his inner circle, including Abu Jihad, rapidly rose through the ranks of ISIL. Al-Shishani became and remains a senior ISIL military commander and Shura Council member and was instrumental in integrating the second wave of North Caucasian foreign fighters[65].

The second wave of foreign fighters (2013–)

The second wave of North Caucasian and Russian-speaking fighters travelling to Syria started in 2014, and accelerated with ISIL's military success in Iraq. Based on a complex network of recruiters established in Western Europe, Georgia, Moscow, and the North Caucasus, recruitment targeted a larger segment of the Muslim population, promoting the role and the importance of the new caliphate. That second wave is mostly composed of young, idealistic Salafists from Dagestan, Chechnya and the Central Asian diaspora in Moscow. They perceive ISIL and the Caliphate as an opportunity to join the Ummah and live under Islamic law without government interference. Contrary to the first wave of militants, these young individuals are ideologically-driven, although they might not have been involved in Salafist groups for a long period of time and might be recent converts. According to investigative journalism in Russia, the FSB has facilitated the departure of

numerous young Salafists by providing them with passports and travelling documents. As in the case of many Arab countries in the 1980s, Moscow has dealt with religious extremists by sending them abroad. Luckily for Moscow, the majority of these foreign fighters have no real intention of returning to the North Caucasus and perceive ISIL as a new life and a new beginning. Furthermore, these untrained volunteers suffered heavy losses in Kobane in 2014 and in Baiji in 2015. The majority of them were seen as cannon fodder, and were never meant to achieve prominent insurgent careers.

> *As in the case of many Arab countries in the 1980s, Moscow has dealt with religious extremists by sending them abroad.*

Since this second wave has mainly joined ISIL, other North Caucasian groups have had to recruit local fighters and other Arab foreign fighters. In 2015, as the ethnic balance inside JMA flipped from a predominantly North Caucasian group to being mainly composed of Arab fighters, the latter decided to take control in order to re-orient the group's resources in the fight against ISIL. Salahuddin was ousted from his JMA leadership position and was replaced by a series of different leaders. In September 2015, JMA finally pledged allegiance to Jabhat al-Nusra, abandoning the neutral position adopted by Salahuddin following Omar al-Shishani's departure. This change in the leadership of the group and its general strategy have resulted in waves of desertions amongst North Caucasian fighters. Salahuddin and his loyal followers have established a smaller and more cohesive organisation than JMA, seeking to remain a Russian-speaking *jamaat* fighting in the name of the IK. Although fighting a jihad, many North Caucasian fighters in Syria remain mainly driven by ethnic kinship rather than a larger dedication to the religion per se. In the near future, the Imarat Kavkaz in Syria might be able to attract Russian-speaking militants who prefer to fight for non-Arabic militant groups and refuse to pledge allegiance to ISIL.

Russian military intervention in Syria

Russian-speaking foreign fighters also played a role in forcing Russia to intervene militarily in Syria. In comparison to Western countries, Russia might be facing a more immediate threat as Russian-speaking fighters from the first wave have established

long-standing relationships with insurgent groups active in Russia. According to local reports, some North Caucasians active in Syria have made it back home and were killed by Russian Special Forces in the North Caucasus. A plot against Moscow's public transit system was recently foiled; it implicated Central Asians and North Caucasians associated with ISIL. One can argue that Russia has indirectly supported the consolidation of these jihadist groups in Syria by allowing Islamists to travel to the region. If the second wave of fighters did not express a clear willingness ultimately to return to Russia, the first one never hid its will to do so and continue the struggle in the North Caucasus.

The Russian decision to intervene in Syria is therefore partly a response to the growing threat posed by Russian-speaking militants from the North Caucasus in Syria. They represent a common threat to the Russian state and the Syrian regime. Russian bombardments have mainly focused on the areas of Latakia, Idlib and Aleppo where North Caucasian and other Russian-speaking fighters are regularly active, instead of the region controlled by ISIL. The intervention can be seen as, at least in part, a pre-emptive measure by the Russian government against its own citizens fighting in Syria. At the same time, the Russian intervention might become a double-edge sword for Russia and Bashar al-Assad. It has led ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra to call for a jihad against the Russian state. This might reinforce the role of North Caucasian militants in Syria, as well as the organisational links between Syrian groups and local insurgent formations in the North Caucasus. The second wave of fighters might very well see Russia as the next major target both in Syria and elsewhere.

The long-range drivers of (in)security and (in)stability in the Middle East

Chapter 7 – The long-range drivers of (in)security and (in)stability in the Middle East

Asking *why* the Middle East has been a region characterised by seemingly endemic insecurity and instability over the 20th century is a question that has often been considered by policy-makers in Western states, and with good reason. From the effects of Western state-building activities across the region and the nationalist responses that led to the rise of several military regimes, through the erupting tensions between nationalism and Islamism and the festering sore of the Palestine question, the Middle East has understandably been viewed as a region of chronic turmoil. Yet, during this century, while the drivers of insecurity and instability were manifold and often seemed irresolvable, they were also, from a Western perspective, drivers of security and stability to counterbalance them, or at least alleviate their effects. These stabilising forces were Western friends—political leaders of countries or of groupings who could be relied upon to promote and to maintain a situation of stability as viewed from the outside and as seen from their own interests. Arguably, the rights, well-being, hopes and aspirations of the populations of Middle Eastern countries were acknowledged but only as long as the partner regimes of the moment were not threatened by the possible advances of their subjects. It is this relationship of convenience that is beginning to unravel today.

The meta-driver of (in)security? The state system

Today, the long-range drivers of (in)security and (in)stability have changed in magnitude, or even in polarity. Consider, in particular, the inadequacies of the post-World War I state system. While it would always be underscored by many analysts as a structural weakness of the region, it can reasonably be countered that the state system, while artificial, was also seeing new realities arise in the form of vibrant nationalist projects, and that working with strong states, and their strong and usually authoritarian leaders, constituted a source of future stability, from a Western perspective. Today's situation is quite different. We are in the midst of a transition from one era of Middle East realities to another, and our knowledge and sense of drivers are also making that transition and still forming. It does seem that the state system

itself—or more accurately its potential reformation—is turning into a driver of instability, rather than the opposite. The challenge of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), as it bulldozes the century-old boundary markers between Iraq and Syria; the rise of the Kurds as they consolidate their hold in Iraq while establishing cantons across northern Syria; the disintegration of the Libyan political space into many different factional areas or even into spaces that resemble the earlier Ottoman provinces all illustrate how the very notion of state in the Arab-majority world may be throwing the region off kilter.

The changing nature of the state system in the region also points to another transition: from dynamics that are very much under the control of the state to currents that are increasingly falling out of such control. The early years of the 21st century illustrate these new dynamics very well, with popular movements demanding domestic reforms across the region and with new, non-state or sub-state, powers emerging that are increasingly able to challenge the sovereignty of the state across localised, but still extensive, territories. Multifaceted socio-economic and environmental drivers underpin these new developments—from population growth, demographic changes, employment patterns, urbanisation and food security through to resource availability and climate change. Together, they present a new and complex world of future scenarios for those following the region.

But there is also a backlash against these drivers, too, from the 'old-world' drivers of security and stability of the 20th century, that is, from those structures, regimes, organisations and ideologies that seek to reassert themselves and preserve the *status quo ante* in the face of the new demands now being made. It thus makes the question of 'how do we define a driver of stability, or a driver of instability' particularly tricky to answer, with any answer being based on a normative view of the world derived from whether one is an actor in the region or a foreign actor with interests in it. From the perspective of Western countries, how should popular demands for reform and democratisation vis-à-vis the entrenchment of military government in Egypt be viewed. Are the Gulf monarchies—themselves products of imperial guile and subsequent external protection—agents of stability whereas those who agitate for democratic change in some of them constitute a source of instability? Or is it the opposite? Are the 'counter-revolutionary' forces of the extant, non-democratic Middle East

states now forces of turmoil, standing as reactionary opponents to the popular forces that are beginning to mobilise—whether democratic or religious? Or should they instead be considered as valued pillars of security and stability facilitating a safer transition through organic political change? These questions are not merely academic. They cut to the core of issues that now have consequences for Westerners as they seek to protect their own societies from developments unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa.

Remembering the old drivers as they may still be relevant

It is only in recent years that observers of the Middle East have elevated social, economic and environmental concerns up the hierarchy of important factors influencing the region. Before then, say, 1995, the focus of a paper on drivers of stability and security would have been squarely on state actors and their relations. In terms of forces of instability and insecurity, without any doubt the top of the list would be occupied by drivers that emanated from several key situations: the Palestine-Israel conflict; Iraq's posturing in the Gulf; Iran's engagement in the Gulf and the wider Middle East; and the problems of dealing with Muammar Ghaddafi's Libya. Of course, these situations changed markedly over time. Iraq's posturing peaked with the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, following which it moved from being a belligerent state to a pariah state, isolated from the rest of the region by international sanctions. Libya, too, saw changes, but in the opposite direction, with Ghaddafi managing to find a way back in from the cold just as Saddam was entering it. The Palestine-Israel conflict fluctuated in intensity over the last decades of the 20th century, but still remained a potent element, acting either as a reason or a catalyst for many of the region's political troubles. Iran had the dubious honour of being a perennial member of the club of state drivers of instability and insecurity, with Western powers' view of Iran as a supporter of international terrorism a constant. Whether Iran really ever did have the capability to influence events on the ground, across the Gulf to the Levant and perhaps beyond remains an open question, but the lack of real evidence of ability, capability and intent did not stop Western powers from factoring the pernicious Iranian meddling into their calculations of future Middle Eastern security and stability scenarios.

The Palestine-Israel conflict is no closer to a resolution than ever before. Iraq no longer poses a strategic threat to the Gulf; Ghaddafi is no more; and the Iranians and the US have managed to carve out the beginnings (and only the beginnings) of a new agreement that may or may not see the rehabilitation of Iran into the international system. So it is not unreasonable perhaps to assert that the 'old drivers' of security and stability are no more, and that new drivers better explain how political, economic and social life in the Middle East now unfold. But are the old ways of thinking about the region entirely obsolete, or do they still have some validity, even in today's radically different world? The answer depends on whether the Middle East has truly entered a new phase of its political development.

Genuine change is taking root indeed. History is rarely clean, however, and human societies and their behaviours have a habit of being conditioned by the legacies of previous times. The Middle East is no exception. Just because the region is in chaos, that popular forces have more agency and that non-state actors are rising does not mean that the state in the Middle East is finished. It also does not mean that non-democratic regimes are now bound to be short-lived. Rather, the state still has relevance, and so, too, does state-to-state engagement, whether this is cooperative or conflictual.

The new long term drivers of (in)security and (in)stability

Without any doubt, the most obvious of the long-term drivers of (in)security and (in)stability in the Middle East is population growth and the associated demographic changes and pressures it will generate. Other factors include unemployment and underemployment; the diversification of economic production and activity; in oil-producing states, the problem of diminishing oil revenue; and the rapidly increasing consumption rates of hydrocarbons that are apparent across the entire region, especially the Gulf.

The pressures of population growth

In terms of population growth, the numbers are staggering. The population of the Arab world alone, in 2015, stands at 357 million and is projected to increase to 468 million over the next ten years[66]. With the higher than average fertility rate that

characterises the region, the demographic profiles of Middle Eastern states have tended to feature a predominance of individuals aged between 15 and 30. But nuance is essential at this point. Many of the statistics used to present this 'youth bulge' are somewhat speculative and often based on old data. It may therefore be that this demographic bulge—identified in the 1990s—has now worked its way up the demographic profile, making Middle Eastern states as broad-shouldered as they are thick-waisted, demographically speaking. If this is the case, then the economic pressures and demands on those states will be even greater than if they were afflicted with a single bulge in the youth cohort.

The economic mismatch

Population growth is sustainable as long as there exist the means to provide for it, whether through the employment offered by a vibrant economy or by the redistributive system of oil-exporting countries of the Gulf.

The employment picture in the Middle East was never a rosy one. Consider the case of Egypt. Even with respectable growth rates (of around 5 per cent before the uprising of 2011), the Egyptian economy was still failing to provide new jobs for its expanding workforce, with much of the new economic growth, and the proceeds of it, instead going to the highest echelons of income earners. With the IMF now projecting economic growth across countries of the Arab world at 3.8 per cent, the mismatch is set to worsen[67]. By the end of October 2015, Egypt's foreign reserves had reportedly fallen to USD 16.4 billion, which would be enough to cover only some months of imports to provide for the country[68].

The picture worsens as countries less stable than Egypt are considered. Syria, Libya and Yemen display the problems not only of decades of economic mismanagement and corruption, but the effects of the countries being in a state of war, with destroyed infrastructure and few if any economic opportunities. Gaub and Laban note that "in terms of the Human Development Index, today Syria is back where it was 37 years ago; and even at a very optimistic growth rate of 5 per cent a year, it would take Syria 30 years to return to its 2010 GDP value[69]" This sad fact is seen across other countries of the region. Egypt and Libya continue to hover on the verge of bankruptcy, while the economy of Yemen has ceased

to function in anything that may be considered as modern economies.

Why is this important? The gap between low-GDP and high-GDP countries is enormous. It is not hard to imagine a Yemeni with a GDP of USD 2,283 per capita and knowing his Arab brothers and sisters in Qatar claim to be sharing his suffering while receiving on average nearly 50 times more income (per capita GDP of USD 102, 211) becoming disgruntled? Yet it is not this stark difference between countries that is a driver of instability and insecurity in the region, at least not for now. Rather, it is the failings inside these countries that are cause for worry. It is the inability to provide for oneself and one's family, the lack of opportunity and progress in one's life. Those shortcomings and the concomitant lack of self-esteem lead individuals to value the possibilities offered by organisations such as ISIL. Without any doubt, the combination of population growth and lack of economic opportunities should be seen as a deadly combination, coming together as a driver of instability and insecurity of very significant proportions.

The challenge to the oil producers

For half of the 20th century, a select group of Middle East countries benefited from possessing some of the world's most important oil deposits. The Middle East is still estimated to have some 43 per cent of the world's oil supplies. The oil wealth served as a driver of stability and security for many decades, with oil prices making it possible for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to pay their population to remain silent and compliant politically. These rentier states were often criticised with their leaderships locked in place by oil revenues. This comfortable relationship is now in a state of flux. Several factors are converging to dilute the ability of those states to satisfy political demands through payments.

The challenge of sectarianism and ethnicism

Perhaps topping the list of drivers of security and stability in the Middle East, according to the media, is the sectarian competition between Sunnis and Shia for domination of the Middle East. Increasingly, as the Kurds build their offences against ISIL, and the Kurdish problem again intensifies in Turkey, the question of ethnic contestation has come to the fore again. These sectarian and ethnic drivers would have been viewed as misleading by academic

specialists in the past, many of whom contending that they were simplistic concepts with which to understand the region's political life. The mobilisation of peoples according to religious and ethnic identities was also considered the work of orientalist foreigners.

The weight of sectarianism in regional politics and societies will remain the focus of heated scholarly debate for decades to come. But the reality of the Middle East seems to be that identity politics works indeed.

These identities not only matter, they are among the most important mobilising factors on the ground in a range of countries. And, because of their importance locally, they now easily can be exploited by regional powers to pursue their national interests. Whether this will mean that the state system of old will be replaced by something new, with states forming according to dominant sectarian and ethnic narratives, remains to be seen. For many, it is not beyond the realm of possibility. The sectarian and ethnic genies are very much out of the bottle and the current chaos pervasive in the region only serves to strengthen them as agents of change.

Conclusion

Today, the task of 'engaging in' the Middle East is inordinately more difficult for Western states than it was twenty years ago. Then, it was straightforward *who* would be dealt with and there was a general idea about what *success* would look like, in foreign-policy terms. While the region remained challenging, there was at least a degree of clarity of vision that led to policies that were at least understandable from the perspective of the interests of Western powers. Now, the situation is quite different. Before any engagement can take place, Western powers are confused as to what they want to or can achieve. The fact that some jihadist forces in Syria are now seen as possible allies, when they were very much enemies before, illustrates that confusion.

Daesh: A long-awaited Sunni revenge in Iraq and the Middle East

Chapter 8 – *Daesh*: A long-awaited Sunni revenge in Iraq and the Middle East

Is ISIL's[70] expansion in the Middle East and the broader Arab and Muslim world still likely to be contained? This difficult question has, for months, lingered in all minds. While the international coalition led by the United States announced until recently significant setbacks inflicted on the jihadist group, in May 2015 its combatants seized the towns of Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. *Daesh*[71] today controls 40 per cent of Iraqi territory (Al-Anbar, Nineveh and Salahaddin provinces) and over 50 per cent of Syria (Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Hasakah, Aleppo and Hama). In addition to spectacular attacks, its members have shown their absolute determination to complete both their regional and global 'caliphate'. Western capitals, for their part, are overwhelmed by this inexorable advance and deeply confused as to the means required to fight against this phenomenon. Pondering the limits of the strategy implemented so far would provide a better understanding of the nature of the enemy, which is far from obvious despite the abundance of information available since the beginning of the crisis. Beyond its numerous despicable atrocities, ISIL remains a highly political, ideological and even socio-cultural entity whose roots can be traced back to the context of the conflict borne out of the Iraq War in 2003. With impressive speed, the group has succeeded in transcending its original base to export itself across borders.

In its wake, *Daesh* has also triggered an unprecedented sequence of instability in the region, where the colliding trajectory of Sunni Arabs, faced with the irrepressible rise of Iran and Shia forces, has yet to see its final outcome. In Iraq, Sunni Arabs have been relegated to the background of a political transition more widely condemned by the Iraqis. They desperately sought ways to avert their fate and eventually inducted ISIL as an instrument of collective revenge. In addition to their fight against the United States, deliberately drawn back to Iraqi soil, the jihadists have placed in the foreground of their armed struggle the Shia and Iran, considered 'disbelievers' and equally responsible for the status of pariahs to which Sunni Arabs have been confined. Regional powers, in turn, are divided in the face of this 'Frankenstein', which they have sometimes directly helped to create and which is now

catching up with them. For *Daesh* is also the monstrous infant of the wars that the neighbouring states of Iraq and Syria have waged for years, one that has brought together the disaffected, marginalised and dispossessed of all stripes.

Without a detailed and documented analysis of the phenomenon unfolding before our very eyes, of its complexity and of the tangled web of responsibilities, connivance and calculations it covers, no way out of the crisis can reasonably be envisaged. If the answer is necessarily global, it will above all depend on the normalisation, or at least the evolution, of the situation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and other countries in the Middle East.

Deep Sunni Arab resentment

Since 2003, the question of Sunni Arab participation has never ceased to poison the entire transition in Iraq. From the beginning of the occupation, because of the choice made by US civil administrator Paul Bremer to proceed with the blind dismantling of the Iraqi army and the dissolution of the Baath Party, many Sunni Arabs found themselves excluded from Iraqi political life and institutions without any hope of a turnaround. In 2015, the effects of their stigmatisation and marginalisation have become nearly insurmountable. Nevertheless, to guarantee genuine political change in Baghdad, Washington deemed it necessary to transfer power from this 'dominant minority' (20 to 30 per cent of the population) to the Shia and Kurdish 'dominated majority'. De-Baathification, largely copied on the denazification of Germany in 1945, was emblematic of this desire to build a wholly new order, but it was immediately assimilated by its targets to the 'de-Sunnification' of Iraq. These measures reduced Sunni Arabs to an inferior status, coupled with military operations of rare intensity in their regions (including those that were not directly related to the Baath Party) that laid the groundwork for the ultimate disaster of *Daesh*.

Ten years before the jihadist assault on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, known for its religious conservatism, the two battles of Fallujah (2004), in the western sanctuary of the insurgency, led to a massive Sunni Arab electoral boycott. Any participation was then seen as legitimising not only foreign occupation but also its supporters, referred to as 'collaborators'. In January 2005, the first elections were thus marked by widespread abstention among

Sunni Arabs, both out of anger and under the pressure of hardened insurgents. Shia Islamists and Kurdish nationalists emerged triumphant from this critical political episode, while Sunni Arabs confirmed their greater insulation.

> *If the answer is necessarily global, it will above all depend on the normalisation, or at least the evolution, of the situation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and other countries in the Middle East.*

The drafting of a new constitution in the summer of 2005 only magnified this trend, to the extent that underrepresented Sunni Arabs were blamed for most of the crimes attributed to the former despot. In October the same year, two thirds of Al-Anbar and Salahaddin governorates rejected the draft constitution, while Sunni Arab fighters—nationalists, Islamists or those nostalgic for the old authoritarian order—started to radicalise and move closer to Salafist spheres. Concurrently, Al-Qaeda in Iraq made the struggle against the United States and Shia "apostates" its priority objective. This sectarianisation culminated during the clashes of 2006 in confrontations involving Sunni insurgents and Shia militias in Baghdad—a symbol of Islam's past glory that the jihadists wish to restore Sunni, even through the use of the most extreme and abject violence.

Following this outbreak of violence, the years 2007 and 2008 were characterised by a rather brief interlude of hope for Sunni Arabs with the emergence of the tribal 'Awakening' (Sahwa), in which many Sunni sheikhs cooperated with US troops. Nevertheless, Sunni Arabs remained on the margin of the Iraqi political system, entirely rooted in Shia dominance, while the Kurds strengthened their autonomy in the north. Once 'transferred' to the Iraqi government, the Sunni Arab tribes that rose up against ISIL in its initial form, proclaimed in the fall of 2006, were stalked by Baghdad, neither willing to integrate them into the military apparatus, nor ready to concede any political representation to their leaders. At that stage, nothing stood any longer in the way of former Baathists and Salafists to present themselves as the only representatives of Sunni Arabs, the guarantors of their future in Iraq and in the Middle East. Among the self-proclaimed protectors of Sunni Arab populations was the so-called Islamic State, which,

albeit weakened by tribal resistance and US counter-insurgency, had not had its last word.

In early 2010, on the eve of symbolic elections (the last held under occupation), Sunni Arabs wished to believe again that a return to Baghdad was possible and relied on the secular Shia Iyad Allawi, leader of the Iraqi National Movement (*Iraqiyya*), a pluri-communal platform, to express their many grievances. Their confidence was scuttled when, following months of stalemate and fruitless talks, the Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in office since 2006, refused to endorse his opponent's victory, undertook a quasi-coup and concentrated all powers while reactivating de-Baathification. From then on, his rivals all became 'Baathists' and 'terrorists'. For Sunni Arabs, this was the last straw and a terrible humiliation: although won through the ballot box and thus perfectly legitimate, their 2010 victory had been stolen from them.

Iraqiyya did not survive this snub and declined, eventually falling apart under the weight of al-Maliki's political manoeuvres and those of his allies, anxious to thwart the resurgence of a potentially threatening Sunni Arab constituency in Iraq. Allawi, for his part, left behind him a population scalded by the government's discriminatory and repressive policies, and eager to challenge al-Maliki by all means possible.

From protest to armed jihad

Baghdad's anti-Sunni campaign peaked in December 2011 when the Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant against Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a leading figure and member of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood. Accused of terrorist activities, the latter went into exile, first in Kurdistan and later in Turkey. All the Sunni Arab provinces were placed under surveillance, while al-Maliki reduced the scope of their prerogatives by deploying the army, police and security forces. Economic projects were intentionally slowed down in these territories. Once again, Sunni Arabs failed to organise a viable opposition, allowing al-Maliki to act as he saw fit. In December 2012, however, the bodyguards of Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, a native of Anbar, were arrested. This was the breaking point, which instigated a large protest movement among Sunni Arabs.

Initially peaceful, this movement called for both a reform of de-Baathification, which had relentlessly targeted civilian populations, and for a less overwhelming presence of Baghdad in provincial affairs. While some expected a dialogue with al-Maliki, Sunni Arabs already contemplated a territorial and political secession on the basis of their identity, no longer believing in reconciliation nor in their own political representatives. Rather, it was the local leaders, tribal and religious (such as imam Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, whose fatwas were followed for some time) who attempted mediation. Yet, in April 2013, al-Maliki dispatched Iraqi security forces to crush a camp of protesters in Hawija, in the province of Kirkuk. Through this blind use of force, the Prime Minister sounded the death knell for any serious negotiation with Sunni Arabs. In mid-2013, the protest movement subsequently turned into a new insurgency.

Such militarisation obviously served the rise of more radical formations calling for an armed revolt, some Salafist-jihadist, others neo-Baathist. This includes the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (*Jaysh Rijal al-Ṭariqa an-Naqshabandiya*), created in 2006 in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's hanging and led by his late deputy Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri.

Active in the north of Iraq and in Syria, a number of jihadists and Baathists joined *Daesh* early on, which did not in fact mean that the whole Sunni Arab community supported the group's ideology and ultraviolent methods. Populations had largely rejected the first Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, but simmering discontent among Sunni Arabs in 2013 offered the jihadists a new opportunity to build popularity and expand their influence. At the end of the year, the ingredients of a vast Sunni Arab uprising were in place, and raging war in Syria allowed ISIL's Iraqi vanguard to export its project beyond the border and capitalise on similar Sunni Arab resentment in that country. A transnational impetus of ethno-sectarian solidarity took shape against the two regimes of Baghdad and Damascus.

Daesh is therefore not only a terrorist group; it is also a direct outcome of Iraq's advanced decay and, to a lesser extent, of the neighbouring Syrian conflict. The Sunni Arab question in Iraq has remained unresolved for more than a decade and ended up pushing Sunni Arabs into the arms of the most brutal player on the field, the one which, in this case, promised them a reversal of their condition and to satisfy all their demands. *Daesh* is not, as has

often been said, an outgrowth of the war in Syria; it is in Iraq that the group historically emerged, and it is also in Iraq that its heteroclite elite formed: long-standing Salafists, embittered former Baathists, officers and paramilitaries, all of whom converged towards a project, the so-called "caliphate", stamped with the seal of instant and timeless Sunni revenge.

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Genuine popular roots

The limits of the coalition's operations targeted at *Daesh* since 2014 have much to do with its strong local roots, which explains the fall of Fallujah, Mosul and numerous other cities. In most cases, a prior agreement was made among tribes, notables and jihadists, to 'liberate' territories against what was perceived as occupation by the Iraqi army, following that of the US military. In Syria, ISIL's leaders were able to convince Sunni Arab populations in the border provinces of the value of their design, particularly as the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad intensified its repression and the ranks of the opposition crumbled. Many armed factions tended either to side with *Daesh* for the sake of tactical victory against the regime, its allies and Iran, or to continue fighting in other lands as yet unconquered.

As a result, when ISIL launched its conquest, it was on favourable ground. The first driver of its success was unprecedented dissatisfaction among Sunni Arabs with the centres of power, mixed, in the case of Iraq, with the mourning of an era when a faction of Sunni Arabs controlled the state apparatus and the sense that Shia only sought to eradicate Sunnism. From this standpoint, *Daesh* was seen as the instrument, although openly barbaric, to recapture power and 're-Sunnify' Iraq. Such an evolution contrasted with the nationalist discourse that Sunni Arabs had traditionally embraced. ISIL cleverly exploited resentment in the regions it penetrated to garner support (or at least passivity of the population), while at first offering redemption to the tribes that had formerly allied themselves with US and Iraqi authorities.

Once established, ISIL strove to win hearts and minds by replicating a strategy used by many other Islamist groups: restoring security, justice and basic services (electricity, drinking water and sewage), creating jobs, and fighting corruption. The quest for security and justice was particularly vivid among Sunni Arabs, repressed and virtually stripped of their citizenship by the central government. In 2013, before the final assault, 60 per cent of Sunni Arabs in Iraq had lost confidence in the existing judicial system, while 80 per cent of Mosul's residents did not feel safe faced with an army that had multiplied checkpoints, extorted local inhabitants and maintained shortages. Sunni Arabs also feared Shia militias coming to their neighbourhoods—including the popular mobilisation units (*al-Hashd al-sha'abi*), comprising between 60,000 and 120,000 men—sponsored by Baghdad and Tehran. In this environment, *Daesh* was primarily seen by a majority of Sunni Arabs as a remedy for all ills.

At the same time, adhesion to the caliphate has substantially differed from one region to the other, and diminished as the abuses committed by jihadists have spread. A number of Sunnis, including insurgent forces like the Islamic Army in Iraq, which repeatedly refused to swear allegiance to ISIL's emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, never identified with the rigid and quasi-totalitarian view of Sunni Islam that the group advocates and have borne the brunt of its violence. Many accounts show that Sunni Arabs do not consent to the jihadist project and have opposed the centralisation of religious and political authority within a single entity; their submission to *Daesh* is, in most instances, purely circumstantial and intended to escape death. Likewise, the security and development strategy enforced by jihadists has met certain obstacles. In addition to their exactions and regime of terror, jihadists did not keep most of their promises. All in all, Sunni Arabs are much divided, both about the notion of a caliphate and what a 'post-Islamic state' would actually mean. This reality is not alien to the essence and traditions of Sunni Islam itself, in which the concept of authority has always been fragmented, unlike Shia Islam which is more centralised.

On the one hand, a significant proportion of Sunni Arabs continues to support ISIL for reasons that range from ideological and political membership to the lack of credible alternatives. Sunni Arab politicians have, for the most part, lost all legitimacy because of their past alignment with the government, notably during the

2012-2013 protests, or conversely their failure to protect their fellow citizens from the jihadist shockwave. Accordingly, to suggest greater inclusion of Sunni Arabs in the existing political process is delusionary in many respects, all the more as only a fraction of Sunni Arabs consider a return to national politics. On the other hand, a growing number of Sunni Arabs reject ISIL and call for arming men and tribes willing to expel their members. Many feel that the Iraqi Army, which collapsed in Mosul and Ramadi, as well as the security forces, are not only unable to defeat *Daesh*, but that their redeployment in the regions held by the jihadists is not desirable in view of their past record. A likely alternative is regional autonomy for these players, inspired by the Kurdish model, which Baghdad has always opposed.

Narrowing strategic options

In an ideal but unfortunately fictional scenario, the defeat of ISIL would mean the total reversal of the conditions that initially fuelled its emergence and explain why, in 2015, there is still so little resistance to its advance. At this point, mention must be made of the devastating dismantlement of the Iraqi Army in 2003, never since reconstituted and marred by scandals, de-Baathification and anti-terrorism laws that have targeted Sunni Arabs first and foremost, with thousands of arrests that provided a fertile breeding ground for the 'Salafisation' of inmates on US bases and in Iraqi and Syrian prisons. Reconciliation in Iraq and Syria is unlikely in view of the dramatic sectarianisation of their societies. Since its offensive, *Daesh* has also turned towards the destruction of all the symbols still attached to these fragile nations: museums, such as in Mosul, ransacked by the jihadists, archaeological sites and ancient cities (Nimrud, Hatra and Palmyra).

Since the beginning of the crisis, three key forces have manoeuvred on the ground and remain in relative positions of strength: the Kurds, the first to have mobilised against *Daesh* both in Iraq and in Syria, with air and humanitarian support from the US and European countries; Shia militias, which took back a number of territories but whose predominant role in the battle is controversial since it largely feeds the discourse, resilience and redeployment of ISIL; and Iran, which, although challenged as a regional power, won the Iraq War of 2003 and is set to win this new struggle due to its direct involvement through the division of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (IRGC) responsible for military and clandestine

operations abroad. In the middle of this equation, one decisive variable is irretrievably lacking: Sunni Arabs, who have lived for months under the yoke of ISIL and must become part of the military campaign. Without such a rebalancing of forces, no revival of the political process can truly come about in Iraq and, by extension, in Syria.

Several questions are thus raised: how to release Sunni Arabs from the grip of *Daesh* by inducing them to become the principal actors of its defeat? Who are the players likely to be mobilised in sufficient numbers to cope with this unprecedented challenge? What should be the terms and guarantees of such mobilisation? More importantly, is it possible to curb the trend of Sunni secession beyond the fight against the jihadists? Clearly, Sunni Arabs will not join the battle if any 'after' means a return to the status quo *ante*, which was unbearable to them.

By late summer 2014, the US launched a series of discussions with Iraqi Sunni Arab tribes so they would cooperate again with Washington and Baghdad. The idea was to put together, within a year, a new tribal force inspired by the *Sahwa* and able to effectively combat ISIL. Retired general John Allen, former deputy commander of US forces in Anbar and appointed as special presidential envoy for the coalition to counter *Daesh*, aimed to press his close contacts with the tribes to set in motion a '*Sahwa* 2.0' and make it a pillar of his strategy. This time, the tribes would be mobilised within an institutional framework, namely a national guard flanked by American military advisers and Special Forces, and cooperating with the army, the Kurdish *peshmergas* as well as other self-defence groups.

While promising, this policy has hardly materialised. Firstly, the *Sahwa* left a legacy darker than it appears at first sight, borne out of rivalries among Sunni sheikhs, suspicions of corruption and financial dependence on the US and the Iraqi government. Secondly, the tribes have been divided between support for the jihadists and their outright rejection. This dynamic makes the creation of a coherent force extremely complex. *Daesh* also anticipated the threat and murdered hundreds of tribesmen who had declared their readiness to take up arms. Besides, much was expected from the Iraqi cabinet appointed by Haidar al-Abadi in July 2014, chosen to normalise relations with Sunni Arabs and supposed to supply arms to their provinces. However, the latter

received no serious military equipment from Baghdad and often had to purchase their weapons on the black market. ISIL literally disaggregated entire tribes, reducing their influence in Iraq even further. The gap between opposing Sunni Arabs and the government may have now become unbridgeable. Indeed, many see Al-Abadi's accession to power as a mere perpetuation of the legacy of his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, who had not armed the tribes despite his promises to do so. Many denounce the *milicisation* of the state apparatus, whose leaders, mostly Shia, have refused since 2011 to concede regional autonomy to Sunni Arab populations.

> *The gap between opposing Sunni Arabs and the government may have now become unbridgeable.*

The lack of relays in Baghdad and in the provinces further complicates this situation and incites neighbouring Sunni Arab regimes to multiply interferences to counter the rise of political Shiism and Iran. Saudi Arabia has provided continued support to Sunni Arabs in Iraq since 2003, more particularly financial. Because of the threats made by *Daesh* (which includes thousands of Saudi fighters), the kingdom has turned to large Sunni tribal confederations (such as the Shammar, related to the ruling family and present in both Iraq and Syria) to mobilise them against ISIL. Jordan has followed a similar policy and in April 2015 shelled Raqqa, the terrorist group's Syrian stronghold, in response to the murder of its young pilot Mouath al-Kassasbeh. Turkey and Qatar formally support the Sunni Arab opposition, unrelated to *Daesh* but mostly jihadist, and continue to display an ambiguous attitude towards ISIL. Ankara is indeed suspected of providing backing to that group, passively (as in Kobane when the Turkish army failed to assist Syrian Kurds) or actively (in the form of arms transfers and flows of fighters). Doha, meanwhile, is reported to have funded some elements of the so-called Islamic State.

As a conclusion

ISIL's longevity, in spite of a sustained campaign of air strikes, has elicited significant worry within the highest spheres of Western decision-making, especially among those who, perhaps naively, thought they were waging a war on a 'classic' terrorist organisation. In June 2015, at a forum in Doha, General Allen himself acknowledged that the battle could take a generation or

more. In the first semester of 2015, jihadist recruits increased from 10,000 to more than 30,000 in Iraq and Syria. Such an increase is not benign: it testifies to the strength of ISIL's political enterprise and its capacity to mobilise and regenerate. Moreover, if the solution remains irrevocably political in the long run, it will certainly not be the one that the West wishes for. For over a decade, Sunni Arabs in Iraq have been marginalised in relation to all matters concerning their future. The crisis of representation affecting them runs deeps, and may already be irreversible. Struck by measures deemed unjust, they have no real hope for a change today, especially when Baghdad calls on Shia militias to 'free' them.

> *...if the solution remains irrevocably political in the long run, it will certainly not be the one that the West wishes for.*

The emergence of a new and legitimate Sunni Arab leadership, offering a substitute to both ISIL and Shia predominance, is the cornerstone of any way out of the crisis. For now, Sunni Arabs have been unable to say who represents them and who is legitimate. Nationalists? Baathists? Islamists, such as Muslim Brothers? Jihadists? They no longer seem interested in appeasing relations with Baghdad and Damascus, and instead appear to be engaged in open secession, which, with or without *Daesh*, should persist and thus force the international community to rethink its strategy and vision entirely.

Syria: Where to from here?

Chapter 9 – Syria: Where to from here?

The period since summer 2015 has been for Syria a moment of rapid and intense change, both on the battlefield and at the diplomatic level. It has undoubtedly produced dramatically new givens in Syria's unending ordeal, the most obvious of which being the direct entry of Russia into the conflict.

Any attempt at trying to gauge the potential future trajectory of the Syrian crisis must take into account the exact situation on the ground, the regional and international context of the war, as well as the strict interdependence between these two dimensions. Only then can one attempt to understand Russia's strategy in Syria and evaluate what options still remain for other powers to navigate out of the crisis.

What was the situation on the eve of the Russian intervention? What remained of Syria?

A rapid look at the map before September 2015, when Russian President Putin ordered direct and massive intervention into the Syrian theatre revealed the following:

Syria was a fragmented country, with a multi-front war, not only between two camps, as is often inaccurately described, but also among some five territories, with multiple combinations of military engagement. In the face of regions controlled by the Assad regime, concentrated in the west of Syria from Damascus to the coastal area, other variously governed territories have been consolidating. To the north and north-east lay three pockets of Kurdish quasi-autonomy, under the control of the People's Protection Units (YPG), an ally of Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); the Hassakah province, the biggest of these three pockets, had been relentlessly trying to unite with Kobane, and then with Afrin further west, to complete the longed-for Syrian Kurdistan, or Rojava. Also, since the fall of several important cities along the Jordanian and on the Israeli borders, a Southern Front Syria was becoming more autonomous, under the domination of various groups like some Druze self-defence units, Sunni tribes with links to Jordan, and moderate units of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). There remained the centre of Syria, a large and partly desertic land left to endless and intricate infighting between Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

(ISIL) and several shades of rebellious groups, ranging from the least to the most Islamist in character, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar el-Sham.

The Syrian central government had completely lost control of its borders with the neighbouring world, to the exception of the Syrian-Lebanese border. The Syrian-Turkish border was shared between Kurdish fighters and ISIL fighters; the Iraqi-Syrian border had been completely erased by ISIL, and the borders with Israel and Jordan were in the hands of the increasingly centralised Southern Front. Only Lebanon remained as a corridor between the Assad regime and the world, with the two crucial entry points of Zabadani and Qalamun, staunchly defended by Hezbollah, in order to achieve full control of the zone, clear the area west of Damascus and maintain free circulation towards Lebanon.

Third, the regime stronghold, or what remained of Assad's Syria, was rapidly shrinking due to multiple defeats since summer 2015, the erosion of the military forces, as well as the capacity of Iran-backed groups to hold the lines. The regime was still in control of the vital stretch of land going from Damascus to the mainly Alawite coastal and mountainous region, through Homs and Hama, with pockets of semi-urban resistance remaining on the outskirts and in villages around these cities. The southern flank of Damascus, the traditional defence backyard of the capital, had been lost in part, with the province of Deraa falling to the rebels, and the provinces of Quneitra and Sweida increasingly out of government control. More importantly, this same territory was becoming untenably thin at some points, a fact highlighted by the regular shelling of the main city of regime loyalists, Latakia, today only a few kilometres away from rebel forces in Jabal el-Akrad. These cruel facts were acknowledged by Assad himself, when, in a speech during the summer, he admitted that the army was now only defending what is vital and defendable, due to limited resources, because hard and cruel choices were to be made.

What are Moscow's strategic aims? Is there only one end-game?

The context of Russia's gambit

It is within this context that the Russian intervention took place. However, another regional and international context is also worth examining to understand Putin's calculations regarding Syria.

Following the deal struck between the P5+1 and Iran about the latter's nuclear program, it was increasingly obvious to many that Teheran was building up its posture as a legitimate actor to become the main power-broker in Syria, potentially with tacit US acceptance. Other regional and international players were thus worried about the potential Iranian 'upgrade' and were prompted to act. This is exactly what Turkey did when it started expressing a strong desire to carve a safe zone in the north and north-west of Syria, confronting strong US reluctance. This did not impede Ankara, however, which stepped up its overflights and raids over Syria and began to prepare a limited ground operation. Putin's sudden and rapid decision therefore amounted to a pre-emption of these manoeuvres, and a bold move to seize the Syrian card. For Moscow, other factors were also facilitating this decision; Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, so far an obstacle to Moscow's appetite over Syria, were sinking in the Yemeni quagmire and less able to devote resources to the Syrian conflict; in Washington, the Obama administration was preparing to spend its last year in office almost exclusively to implement the Iran deal. Putin decided to fill the vacuum to Russia's advantage.

Multiple lines of defence

Beyond these conjectural and rather opportunistic considerations, it would probably be risky and presumptuous to identify specific Russian grand plans for a well thought-out end-game in Syria. Rather, it is safer and probably much more realistic to believe that what Putin has in mind is a series of incremental end-games, a succession of contingency plans, and a cascade of defence lines that, like Russian dolls, are adaptable according to the events, both on the ground and on the diplomatic battlefield.

The first and most favourable of these outcomes would be the restauration, to the widest extent possible, of Syria's original state, betting on a reinvigorated Syrian army, the Russian and Soviet traditional spoiled child. In this respect, if the venture needs the keeling of Assad in power, or if this is doable while somehow keeping Assad in power, Moscow is of course all in for that. If needed, also, a whitewashing of the regime's facade is not ruled-out, through early elections, the formation of a 'national unity government', and cosmetic revisions to the president's

prerogatives. This is most probably the message that Putin delivered to Assad during his October 2015 visit to the Kremlin.

If this proves impossible or too costly, a second line of defence is to revert to what can be held of coastal and central Syria, after having protected the Alawite canton—and this is the significance of the majority of Russian airstrikes, which were concentrated on this hinterland. From there, Putin, as in Ukraine and Crimea, would then 'freeze the conflict' and the demarcation lines, and embark on a long attrition war of positions, leaving the rest of Syria to fragment or become chaotic. An example of the latter is the desertic centre that would thus become the 'owned' part of the West and the Gulf States, for them to sort out and manage. In such a scenario, Russia's expectation would be that its rivals, ultimately exhausted and bled by their impossible management of such a Syrian map, would then beg Moscow for a solution.

Putin's last contingency plan is the permanent protection of 'useful Syria', where progressively all minorities would go for protection and seek shelter from the chaotic rest of the country. That would be the launching pad for a negotiated, long-term solution that would oversee and consolidate the partition of Syria, granting Moscow the protection of the statelet on the coast, where its military bases are, and where undersea gas fields could become the new Russian cash cow ensuring the sustainability of its project.

What options are left?

Since the first moments of the Russian intervention in Syria, the US administration's reaction has been at best a timid one, and more often an ambiguous and shifting one. The Obama administration first expressed worry about the complicating factor that this intervention represents, rendering the Syrian conflict more intricate; it then solved its position by expressing meek satisfaction while hoping to see Russia join the anti-ISIL collective, but sending simultaneously signals that the Russian campaign could as well bolster Assad and ruin diplomatic efforts. Finally, for the US military, the main worry and effort was to find some agreement to avoid collisions in Syria's skies between Russia's and the US-led coalition's aircraft.

At the same time, the US was also discreetly encouraging the provision by Turkey and the Gulf States of a more robust military

and logistical aid to the rebellion. This was to take the form of faster deliveries of TOW missiles, that were efficiently used to curtail any serious advance by the Assad regime against the rebels.

If one is to make sense of this, the more logical explanation would be to say that Washington does not seek confrontation with Russia, but wants at the same time to keep its options open. Guiding those calculations again is the Obama administration's priority for the coming year, namely consolidating the benefits of the Iran deal, managing the Syrian conflict at the lowest cost level possible, and handing the Middle East file to the next administration in a shape that is not too damaged. This is the best way one can understand the new diplomatic process established now in Vienna, in which Iran sits at the table, but in which US Secretary Kerry keeps repeating the same US and Western concerns—only a departure of Assad from power will do—with enough ambiguity as to when in the process his ousting should occur.

In some ways, the diplomatic ballet around Syria's cadaver increasingly resembles the one around the Palestinian question, in which formulas about the unavoidability of a 'two-state-solution' abound, while the reality on the ground is everyday more remote from the stated goal. In the last output of the Vienna process, the idea of a UN-supervised cease-fire resurfaced, something that had failed already in 2012.

A year to lose, and losing Syria...

Short of any serious and radical solution for the Syrian crisis itself, the country is condemned to steady erosion. In the regions that will remain outside the regime's control and Russia's protection, several competing forces will continue to fight, segment or coalesce, radicalise and enhance control over territory, people, and the local economy. Syria will remain and grow as the ultimate generator of the region's many problems: border insecurity, sectarian polarisation in the neighbouring countries, and an unstoppable outflow of refugees to Europe.

Expectations by each player that its foes will ultimately become bogged down in Syria may appear reasonable in a great-power game, but they nevertheless imply the slow death of Syria and the rapid metastasis of its many problems into the region and beyond.

Regional implications of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry

Chapter 10 – Regional implications of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry

The Saudi-Iranian relationship casts a noxious pall over the region. The regimes' proxies and their own militaries continue to battle for power and influence in a range of countries against a background of shrill propaganda generated by the state and notionally independent media on both sides. Iranian culpability for almost any negative development in the region has been a staple of Saudi media for decades and dovetails neatly with the Saudi school curriculum, which ascribes to the Shia community in general an almost sub-human status. Iranian propaganda might lack the same Elders-of-Zion-like monstrous caricatures of Sunnis in general but it makes up for that lack with implications of near-apostasy in its relentless characterisation of Saudi policy as an arm of the Zionist-Imperialist project. It is this toxic mutual hostility, seeded in layers of sectarianism, nationalism and state competition that now affects decisions made everywhere from camps in Syria, Sinai or Libya, to government offices in Cairo, Baghdad or Jerusalem.

1979 and all that

The 1979 Iranian Revolution marks the effective starting point of the current Saudi-Iranian relationship. Centuries of Persian-Arab and Shia-Sunni conflict provided a fertile environment for what has happened since and there was little love lost between the Pahlavi and Saudi regimes, a condition that Saudi oil production policy immediately prior to the revolution certainly did nothing to ameliorate. However, the revolution drew new lines of outright confrontation that were reinforced by Saudi support for the Iraqi invasion, the new Iranian leadership's allegations of Western involvement in the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure and the hostage crisis. The tensions between the new revolutionary regime and the Saudi government, coupled with the persistent and lethal consequences of the aftermath of the Saur revolution in Afghanistan, continue to define much of what is happening across the region and beyond.

Proselytism and revolutionary contagion

Iran's new regime was always on a collision-course with the kingdom. The Saudi state represented to the revolutionary authorities almost everything that was wrong with the region. To Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, hereditary monarchies were anathema; that the kingdom was an ally of the US (the Great Satan), and soon a backer of Saddam Hussein as well as a proselytizer of anti-Shia ideology only made conflict more inevitable. Revolutionary rhetoric ridiculed the Saudis, and Khomeini and his colleagues took care to propagate criticisms of the kingdom that hit close to home: allegations of a profane plutocracy subservient to Israel's greatest supporter could just as easily have been constructed by the Saudis' domestic and regional Arab opponents. The Saudi response, founded on a violently sectarian worldview, was similarly aggressive and dismissive.

Wahhabiya v Vilayat-e Faqhih

From their foundations, it was not in the make-up of either to keep their mutual hostility within their own borders. The founding religious ideology of the Saudi state, Wahhabism, is an inherently proselytising creed, a reformation movement, the *daawah wahhabiya*, that requires expansion and conversion. The history of the creation of the second Saudi state in the first third of the 20th century, furthermore, is that of the creation of a tribal empire, the expansion of which was halted by geography, Great Power interference, and capacity rather than will.

On Iran's side, although there is no directly equivalent theological drive in Khomeini's seminal treatise, by proposing a theocratic form of government the Supreme Leader was throwing down a gauntlet to governments like the Saudi regime, in particular those that controlled Shia populations.

The potential audience for Wahhabi proselytism is clearly far greater than that for Khomeini's *vilayat-e faqhih*[72] doctrine, since it encompasses in theory the entire Sunni world. Khomeini's teachings are primarily a theory of government and has not even been adopted by the regime's sympathisers and allies in Iraq, let alone elsewhere. In practice Iran has not even made adherence to Khomeini's concepts a condition of its support. Nevertheless, in establishing itself as a radical Shia state, the new Islamic Republic

was setting up a confrontation with its neighbours and particularly the kingdom. Struggle against the oppression of Sunni orthodoxy is a key component of Shiism. This new, Shia Islamic state was therefore naturally inclined to assist 'oppressed' fellows elsewhere that laboured under the yoke of Sunni oppression. This concept has been a recurrent and often dominant element of Iran's engagement with Shia communities in the Arab world.

After some internal debate within the new revolutionary government, particularly over to the activities of Ali Akbar Mohtashemi in the Beqaa Valley, the Islamic Republic ultimately committed to supporting Shia communities, in Lebanon, Iraq and, most dangerously for the Saudis, in Bahrain and the kingdom's own Sharqiyah Province. And Iran's influence was felt beyond these communities. However, Khomeini's melding of populist and nationalist ideas with religious ideology also made his revolution an inspiration for dissident Islamists across the region.

While the Saudi regime—and others—actively bank-rolled the Afghan mujahideen, from the 1980s onward, with the consequences that we all recognise today, Khomeini and his allies in government also sought to capitalise on this impact to internationalise their revolution, even outside the Shia world. Naming the street outside the closed UK embassy in Tehran after IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands could be dismissed as twisting the tail of the colonial Small Satan, but changing the Egyptian embassy's address to Khaled al-Islambouli Street represented a more direct adoption of the Egyptian state's radical opponents.

Saudi-Iranian influence and foreign fighters

Through Wahhabi proselytism, Iranian financing and the transfer of military expertise, Iran or Saudi Arabia can now take some credit for, among others, the preferred ideology of the current generation of Islamist radicals, techniques used by Hamas, Al-Qaeda's tactics, Hezbollah's long-term strategy and many more. It has to be said, however, that Saudi-Wahhabi DNA can be more directly traced in the recruitment of foreign fighters than can Iranian involvement. While the ranks of Iraqi jihadists have been boosted over the past decade by fighters from as far apart as Indonesia and the UK, Iranian-backed forces in Syria remain almost exclusively made up of Lebanese, Syrian and Iranian nationals.

This is largely a consequence of the structure of the global Muslim population and the limitations that this places on Shia ideology. Khomeini's state is not a proselytising entity, it does not seek power through the conversion of non-Shia. Rather it seeks to establish influence within and even to control Shia communities, at the same time seeking to boost the power of those communities into national powers, in turn expanding its own influence. This is the Hezbollah model: develop an ally within a disadvantaged Shia community, bolster it through military and financial support, securing for it—and Iran—a role in that country's government. Khomeini's successors are seeking the same outcome in Yemen, via the Houthi minority. This does involve the transfers of foreign fighters, but these are almost exclusively Iranians, not fighters recruited worldwide.

> *While the ranks of Iraqi jihadists have been boosted over the past decade by fighters from as far apart as Indonesia and the UK, Iranian-backed forces in Syria remain almost exclusively made up of Lebanese, Syrian and Iranian nationals.*

It is rather the Saudi legacy of the Afghan wars that is most prevalent in the region and beyond today. Nevertheless, it would be hard to argue against the proposition that the example of the Iranian revolution was a signal factor in secular, nationalist politics being supplanted by Islamist radicalism across the Arab world, even in countries with no significant Shia population.

The region in 2015

With the two countries now more deeply engaged in proxy and direct confrontation in more countries than at any previous time, the impact of their mutual hostility in fomenting and sustaining regional conflicts shows no sign of diminishing. It is a popular trope among observers to use the supposed Arab aphorism that "my enemy's enemy is my friend" to suggest that antagonists can find common cause. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) supposedly provides a perfect case for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Mutual hostility towards the jihadists should provide an opportunity for compromise and cooperation, the argument goes.

In reality, as the Russian intervention is increasingly demonstrating, the lines that separate the allies and opponents of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad are as compelling as the mutual antipathy towards ISIL.

Moreover, even if there were an environment less fraught than Syria—or Iraq—in which Iran and Saudi Arabia could cooperate, they would still need to overcome the domestic effect of their own propaganda. Although elements within both governments recognise the limitations of their propagandist caricatures, the power of those caricatures gives them only very limited freedom of action.

Minimal cooperation, not rapprochement

This does not mean that cooperation, certainly tacit, is impossible. At times, particularly in the mid-1990s, Saudi and Iranian officials were able to maintain relatively good relations and lines of communications. The Saudi response to the failure of the Saudi—and Israeli and US Republican Party—campaign to convince the United States government and the other P5+1 states not to sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an example of this pragmatism. Rather than rail against the deal, the Saudis adopted a less directly confrontational stance, preferring to chip away at international perceptions of Iran through the measured tones of Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, rather than the histrionics of the Israeli prime minister.

Nevertheless, any Saudi accommodation with Iran must be limited and probably to some extent clandestine, or at least low profile, such is the level of popular antagonism towards Iran that affects perceptions within the kingdom at almost all levels. The over-riding context is of a deep and mutual hostility that neither state is likely to attempt to overcome without a fundamental change in their governments.

The implications for the region are, as in so many other areas, almost entirely negative and are made worse by the current internal conditions within the Saudi and Iranian regimes. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who favours a more cooperative relationship with the kingdom, looks likely to pay the inevitable price for his success in securing the nuclear agreement. Rumours in Tehran suggest that his replacement will not come from the

moderate wing of the foreign ministry but from the right. Meanwhile in Riyadh the ascent of Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose unusual public hagiography trades heavily on his bellicose attitude to Iranian 'interference' in Yemen does not suggest the Saudi approach is about to become more congenial.

Sunni-Shia divisions across the region: The use and consequences of sectarianism

Chapter 11 – Sunni-Shia divisions across the region: The use and consequences of sectarianism

However the victors may write the historical record, religious wars are not fought to settle disputes about religion. War is an expression of temporal competition, not of spiritual concern. But when Stalin asked dismissively in 1935 how many divisions the Pope had, he was doing so in a European context that was very different from the situation in the Middle East today. In present times, religion, particularly in the Muslim world, plays a major part in identity politics while other ways of deciding and defining loyalties are becoming weaker. To ask how many divisions the presumptive Caliph Ibrahim has is to pose a valid and important question.

The current unholy mess in Syria, Iraq and Yemen is a product of both history and circumstance. The geographical divisions established in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire depended on the power of their creators to maintain them, and as they lost the ability to do so, local leaders took on the challenge. However, given the fissiparous nature of these artificial states, government was all about exerting control rather than building the body politic. Thus institutions were designed and staffed to support the ruler rather than serve the ruled. Leaders relied on cliques and minority groups, and suspicion and resentment were ill-concealed behind the statues and posters that celebrated their exploits. Crafty tactics of divide-and-rule, based on intimidation and reward, allowed a clutch of ruthless politicians to emerge and prosper; but in the process of ensuring that they remained unchallenged, they guaranteed a troubled succession.

One tool that was ready to hand, and irresistibly attractive to these leaders as a way to underpin their power, was the claim of religious legitimacy. While they remained secular, they nonetheless used religion as a glue to bind together groups that might otherwise have self-identified according to local differences. The most obvious expression of this tactic was in Saudi Arabia, in a process that began as early as the 18th century. More recently it was also evident in Iran following the revolution of 1979, where the new rulers completely obliterated any line between religion and state. Unfortunately, in both countries, despite the establishment of

enduring regimes, subsequent leaders did not try—or were not able—to break away from the religious identity that their predecessors had used to gain power. And in the face of new challenges, religious identity has become increasingly narrow and exclusive.

One of the many paradoxes of the Middle East is that stability has depended on peaceful coexistence between Sunni and Shia, while at the same time sectarianism has grown. There are three principal reasons for this: first, the growing identification of governments with sectarian belief, especially when in these terms the government comes to represent the minority; second, the growth of regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which is now almost exclusively cast in sectarian terms and has spread widely throughout the Middle East; and third, the severe weakening of states such as Egypt, that might have offered non-sectarian leadership, coupled with the partial withdrawal from the region—after disastrous over extension—of the United States.

Despite its origins, the Sunni and Shia divide, dating back to the earliest days of Islam, is not in itself a cause of violence. Many societies in the Middle East and elsewhere have absorbed the relatively small differences in belief and practice that characterise the two sects, and, indeed, the many sub-sects that exist beneath them. The great Caliphates showed most tolerance when they were at their strongest, and just as there are Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, despite the ferocious sectarianism of the Wahabbists, so too are there Sunnis in Iran, albeit less than 10 per cent of the population. The king of Saudi Arabia has a responsibility to all Muslims as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and the Supreme Leader in Iran claims to guide all Muslims in his interpretation of Islamic law.

In fact, despite the long war with Iraq in the 1980s and its current differences with Saudi Arabia, Iranian foreign policy claims to be inspired by its opposition to the satans of the West, and to Israel, not to the Sunni monarchies of the Middle East. Nonetheless, although Iranian military engagement in Syria and Iraq is purely political and aims to maintain the regional influence that Iran has won as a result of the US invasion of Iraq, its language is highly sectarian. Shia militias from Iraq, closely directed by Iran, and fighters from Hezbollah sent to Syria on Iranian orders, all claim to be defending important Shia religious symbols, such as the tomb of

the Prophet's granddaughter, Zaynab, outside Damascus, from Sunni attack. Saudi Arabia is even less inhibited in expressing its political interests as religious disdain for Shia, making Iran both a political and an emotional target.

This is not going to be a competition that ends with the total defeat and disappearance of one side or the other. Islam is not the answer when Muslims are fighting Muslims, and nor is nationalism when the conflict does not take the form of a direct confrontation between states. New flags fly on the battlefield, representing new identities. The hard borders of our brightly coloured maps are obscured by the shifting fronts between groups whose identity is as much defined by what they are as by where they are. In this context, today's combatants have had to find an equally effective but less inclusive meme than Islam. Sectarianism is their answer.

> *The hard borders of our brightly coloured maps are obscured by the shifting fronts between groups whose identity is as much defined by what they are as by where they are.*

In Syria, there are Sunnis that support Assad, and Shia that support the rebels, and as in Iraq and Yemen, a vast majority of the country that just wants peace and stability. But the encouragement of sectarian identity and the spread of proxy warfare have forced communities to take sides. They have led not just to the displacement of vast numbers of people, but also to a form of ethnic cleansing that will make it hard if not impossible to return these countries to their previous shape and form. The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), no stranger to such tactics, is a principal beneficiary; the advantage to the other main protagonists is harder to calculate.

The one factor that unites the Middle East is opposition to ISIL. So far however, ISIL is a secondary target as although all states understand that it represents a threat, there are other threats that concern them more. At the same time, it suits ISIL to challenge the unity of the opposition by casting the problems of the region in sectarian terms, so increasing the depth of the religious divide. It can capitalise on the evident discrimination that lay behind the poor levels of governance offered by their governments to the Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria, and suggest that it will be

even worse if the Shia have a second chance to rule them. As a result, extremism rises and the split expands, with a sub-categorisation of Islam not just between Sunni and Shia, but between Salafism, as the true expression of Sunni Islam, and everything else, including Shiism.

It is hard to imagine how the destructive growth of sectarian politics may be reversed, except of course that it has all happened before. Revolutionaries have always sought ideological glue to hold their supporters together, whether drawn from the secular, such as Marxism or fascism, or from the religious, or even from their own personality cults. Major belief systems such as Islam survive and prosper over time and across cultures because they allow many different readings and interpretations. The Islam of the most mystic Sufi is as well supported in the Quran and hadith as is the Islam of the ardent Salafist. As a new regime survives or falls, the beliefs that it has had to draw from for its initial support revert to the mean or wither away, depending on their own sustainability.

ISIL will become increasingly exposed as a political rather than a religious movement as its promises and prophecies remain unfulfilled. It will lose whatever religious credibility and legitimacy it has managed to claim as it is increasingly judged by its actions rather than its words. But it is not the only body in the Middle East that fans the fires of sectarianism. The proxy war waged by Saudi Arabia and Iran is more destructive as it spreads so wide and has become so bitter. If this were a war between Arabs and Persians, or directly between Saudi Arabian and Iranian forces, it would be easier to address, but there are now so many bit players and complicated relationships beyond the region, that there are few if any solutions in sight, let alone good ones.

Even with an accommodation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, fighting would not end, and violence in Libya, for example, which has nothing to do with sectarianism, needs another solution. But when these two countries, with the help of Russia, Turkey and the United States, can recognise a coincidence of interest and begin to bring the situation in Syria under control, Yemen, Iraq and possibly Libya, too, will look a lot easier to deal with.

Turkey, ISIL and Syria

Chapter 12 – Turkey, ISIL and Syria

On a sunny October day in 2015, two suicide bombers detonated their loads with devastating consequences. In the middle of what is one of Turkey's best-defended cities, Ankara, over 100 demonstrators made up of mostly Kurds and left-wing activists perished and hundreds were severely wounded. Although all the signs pointed towards the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as the perpetrator, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government chose to point the finger at its convenient bugaboos, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with which it finds itself in a bitter struggle following the collapse of a 2013 ceasefire in June 2015.

The government's attempt to blame the PKK was not just an opportunistic act, especially considering that state and AKP-controlled press exercises an overwhelmingly dominant role in Turkey, but also an effort to mask its inadequate response to the growing ISIL presence in Turkey. Among the two Ankara bombers was the older brother of another suicide bomber who had murdered some 32 young activists in the southern town of Suruç soon after the June 2015 elections. That bombing had targeted activists who were preparing to go on a humanitarian mission to the town of Kobane in northern Syria where Syrian Kurds had defied the odds and managed—with US help—to defeat an ISIL onslaught. This in fact was the second in a series of bombings targeting Kurds or their supporters. The first was an attack on a rally by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) on the eve of the June elections. It appears that all three cases are not only related but also connected to Syria and Turkish jihadists who went to Syria[73].

All three bombs have had severe domestic political repercussions as they helped push the country towards an ethnic conflict and violence as combustive rhetoric inflamed elements on both sides. Paradoxically, despite all the suspicions pointing at it, ISIL uncharacteristically never claimed responsibility for these events. At the heart of its maintaining a distance from the bombing is ISIL's worry that the Turkish state would have to instigate a far wider crackdown on its supporters in the country. From all the available circumstantial evidence, ISIL has built up an important infrastructure in Turkey that helps recruit potential fighters (some

1,300 Turks have crossed over to fight in Syria); use Turkey as a transfer country for both foreign fighters and supporters and much needed materiel, ranging from food to ammunition; and even treat wounded fighters.

The Turkish-ISIL relationship is complicated by two other factors. The first is the complex relationship the AKP government has had with jihadists fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Second is the rise of the Syrian Kurds, and in particular the success of the Democratic Union party (PYD), which is affiliated with the PKK. Ever since the beginning of the stalemate in the Syrian civil war, Turkish authorities frustrated with the Syrian president's resilience decided to support jihadists who were far more effective at taking on the regime compared with the 'moderate' opposition. In the process, Turkey became a willing participant in and contributor to the jihadist pipeline. Though this began before the advent of ISIL and initially mostly in support of Jabat al-Nusra, there is no question that ISIL benefitted largely because it was impossible to distinguish each and every one of the jihadists' intentions crossing the border.

The Kurdish question in Turkey is not new although, under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish state for the first time undertook measures to relieve the tensions between the two communities. In March 2013, the PKK declared a ceasefire that helped start negotiations between the PKK and the state. However, the rise of the Syrian Kurdish PYD changed the Turkish government's calculations regarding Kurds. The PYD became the single most important Kurdish group with the intention to create a three-canton autonomous region in northern Syria. Given its close links to the PKK—PYD militias were trained by the PKK—the PYD's success was perceived as a strategic threat by Ankara. When ISIL decided to invest the Syrian-Kurdish border town of Kobane in October 2014, the Erdogan government made it clear it did not want the PYD defenders to succeed. Ankara was infuriated by the US decision to help the Kurds and deal the besieging ISIL forces devastating blows. Collaboration between the PYD and the US deepened following the Kobane incident; the two began planning operations together and achieved some measured victories in capturing territory from ISIL.

Turkish policy towards first Jabhat al-Nusra and then ISIL came under severe US pressure. In May 2013, during Erdogan's visit to

Washington, the Obama administration confronted him on Turkey's support for al-Nusra. Eventually, Ankara backed away from its support but did little to control its borders or rein in the support networks that had mushroomed in Turkey. The AKP government and Erdogan in particular have been seen as pursuing a sectarian policy or one that has strong Sunni overtones. While certainly not the intention of the government, such a policy may have also helped foster the creation of a pro-ISIL infrastructure. In fact, many pro-government NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) were actively involved in transporting fighters across the border. Repeated US demands for access to Turkish air bases in southern Turkey to be used in the air attacks on ISIL were refused by the Turkish government.

Paradoxically, it is the growing relationship between the US and the PYD that ultimately convinced the Turks to change their policy about opening the air bases. Ankara worried that this collaboration was helping not just the PYD and its goals gain legitimacy, but indirectly create linkages between Washington and the PKK. While the Turks have agreed to participate in attacks against ISIL—and they have engaged in a few airstrikes—the most important contribution Turkey could make to the anti-ISIL coalition was to better monitor its borders and take on the pro-ISIL infrastructure at home. The opening of the bases has not, however, diminished the friction with the US as the latter has intensified its cooperation with PYD militias and even made air drops of arms and ammunition to them.

> *...it is the growing relationship between the US and the PYD that ultimately convinced the Turks to change their policy about opening the air bases.*

The long term

From Turkey's standpoint, the PKK and by extension the PYD are the main concerns. The Turkish National Security Council has pushed for including the PYD among internationally recognised terrorist groups despite allied and Western pronouncements to the contrary. Beyond this, Ankara has had to be careful in its approach towards ISIL; while it opened the air bases to coalition aircraft, Turkey has been reticent to take direct action against the jihadist

organisation. Turkish rhetoric against ISIL has been quite strong, yet it is also often used opportunistically to equate ISIL with the PKK, often suggesting that the latter is a worse scourge.

In contrast, ISIL has begun publishing an online magazine in Turkish called *Konstantiniyye*, a play on the word Constantinople. The magazine, slick and propagandistic in nature, takes on Erdogan's government by suggesting that the first conquest of Constantinople did not accomplish its intended aim and the city has to be re-conquered to make it really Islamic. It also argues that accepting democracy is taking on another religion; a Muslim can either leave his religion and believe in democracy or remain a Muslim and turn its back on democracy as the two are mutually contradictory. For all the rhetoric, ISIL has been relatively quiet when it comes to anti-state operations in Turkey. It has banked on the expectation that attacks against Kurds and leftists would not engender the tough response from the state against it. To date it has been correct in its expectations. Still, ISIL in Turkey does have a significant potential that ought to worry the authorities in Ankara. This also explains why Ankara has been reluctant to send its aircraft to bomb ISIL targets in Syria.

What Turkey has to contend with are the repercussions of a coalition decision to take on ISIL, especially if attempts were made to liberate Raqqa and Mosul. Would ISIL *then* decide to retaliate against Turkey?

Local measures to counter the appeal of the fights in Syria and Iraq: Defections

Chapter 13 – Local measures to counter the appeal of the fights in Syria and Iraq: Defections

However one examines the metrics, it is clear the air campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) alone will not be successful to defeat the threat. At the same time, attempts to train, equip and support indigenous counter-ISIL forces, in either Iraq or Syria, are at best a medium-term endeavour and, like air strikes, are unlikely to succeed on their own. As such, I would like to explore a complementary line of effort to undermine ISIL in Syria and Iraq should be explored, namely promoting defections locally. To date, defector narratives have primarily been used as a messaging tool to point out discrete instances of ISIL acting 'unislamically' with a view to discouraging recruitment. While this is to be encouraged to undermine the organisation's foreign fighter recruitment efforts, one should also explore how to develop a strategy to encourage both foreign fighter and domestic defections from within *Daesh*[74] as a non-kinetic complement to the air campaign and attempts to support anti-ISIL armed actors in Syria and Iraq.

> *...to promote defections to undermine ISIL from within rather than merely to retard recruitment from without.*

This non-kinetic line of effort acknowledges the long term horizons of military efforts to degrade ISIL and proposes to develop a defector campaign to promote fissures from within the organisation; in essence, to promote defections to undermine ISIL from within rather than merely to retard recruitment from without. Not everyone is amenable to defector messaging and this can only ever form part of a multi-faceted approach. But that is no reason not to initiate such activities now. Anecdotal evidence from ISIL defectors in Syria and contacts involved in supporting defections to date suggest that there are a considerable number of individuals within ISIL who wish to defect and that providing an off ramp, or exit, for such individuals could play an important complement to the military campaign. In fact, both lines of effort are linked, with the kinetic campaign and its outcomes providing a clear impetus for those reconsidering their involvement within ISIL.

> *...a considerable number of individuals within ISIL wish to defect...*

The promotion of defections from ISIL relies on understanding the various motives for which individuals join ISIL, but also why individuals leave it. Building this data set will require the combined efforts of academia, the anti-ISIL Coalition, the neighbouring states and, critically, partners inside Iraq and Syria who have direct access to individuals inside ISIL. This local perspective and a segmented understanding of the ISIL target audience for defector messaging are likely to be significantly more nuanced than recent external defector campaigns. To take a look at a couple of those:

a. Online reactions to the Sawab Centre's Defectors Campaign during the week of 17-21 August 2015. The main thrust of the campaign was on Twitter, employing the hashtags #DaeshLiesExposed and #أكلاذيب_داعش_تفضح, with ancillary hashtags #NoToDaesh and #لا_لداعش, which are already in use by other government-sponsored efforts such as the US State Department Digital Outreach's "Think Again, Turn Away". The hashtags—particularly the Arabic ones—received moderately high usage and retweets (between 20-50 max). The YouTube videos posted at the outset of the campaign garnered between 2000 and 4000 views. However, there were several instances of *Daesh* supporters hijacking the hashtags to post content subversive to Sawab's mission. Besides frequent criticism of the campaign's association with the US and UAE, there were few specific critiques posted online. Unique users suggested that Sawab interview defectors from countries other than Saudi Arabia, complained that some of the associated news stories tweeted by partners were "out of date," and in one case suggested that the videos be published without background music.

   Support for Sawab campaign and debate

   Several positive comments supporting the campaign or echoing its message emerged in response to the campaign's tweets or using the associated hashtags. The sources were a mix of native Arabic or foreign posters,

though the majority of chatter was in Arabic. Many of these highlighted *Daesh's* corruption of true Islamic teaching.

The campaign also sparked debate between pro- and anti-*Daesh* voices, such as an exchange about one of the YouTube testimonials. In this case, the poster criticises a *Daesh* supporter (Abou Baker Sabaa) for "applying God's *shari'a* through killing and excommunicating Muslims" and "distorting the true image of Islam".

Criticism of US and UAE involvement in campaign

One user responded to several posts by calling attention to the fact that the Sawab Centre is sponsored by US and Emirati funding. A poster snidely criticised the campaign's connection to the US State Department, likely a reference to the frequent retweets of the US Department's Arabic account of the Sawab Defectors Campaign Video.

Daesh *supporters hijacking hashtag*

Daesh supporters continue to hijack the hashtags, particularly the Arabic #أكاذيب_داعش_تفضح to post pro-*Daesh* propaganda. There are multiple examples of this.

b. Online reaction to the defector campaign of the US State Department's Center for Strategic Counter-terrorism Communications (CSCC) (started 17 September 2015). The hashtag (#تركوا_داعش_لأنها) did not gain significant online traction. The highest engagement on a single posting was 19 retweets, while the majority of the posts received zero responses. The hashtag was used in several ways. One was to reply to *Daesh* supporters with anti-*Daesh* messages or links to stories that cite its crimes. The other was to promote anti-Daesh activities by coalition partners, such as airstrikes, military advances or arrests of fighters. Notably, *Daesh* supporters did not attempt to hijack the campaign by promoting their propaganda, an indication that the hashtag had not elicited much awareness.

Other points

- The account leading the campaign was the State Department CSCC's Digital Outreach Team.
- The tweets started on 17 September 2015 and a majority were replies to *Daesh* supporters who tweeted *Daesh* news or boasted about *Daesh* achievements. Many replies contained an Arabic message that translated as "You can deny your position as you like but the rays from the sun cannot be blocked with a sieve".
- Later the hashtag was used to spread news of *Daesh* defeats, Iraqi or Kurdish advances, and coalition airstrikes.
- According to hashtag tracking web sites, the total number of posts containing the hashtag reached only 250, with almost all originating from US government-affiliated accounts.
- The tweets with the highest engagement only received 19 and 13 retweets. Both tweets came from the same account, which is also a US affiliate.
- The majority of the tweets received zero responses.
- We were not able to find an example of a *Daesh* supporter using the hashtag to promote *Daesh* in a positive light or spread its propaganda.

As such, while it is clear that a defector campaign can play a key non-kinetic role in undermining *Daesh* from within, whether its target audience be European fighters, regional fighters or local Syrians and Iraqis, any approach will need to be more nuanced and focus on the local. Further thoughts on the promotion of a localised approach to promoting defections include:

a. Adopt an approach that seeks to promote attitudinal change, then behavioural change. For simplicity's sake, this can be broken this down into three phases (the 3 "Ds") that should be reinforced by attributable messaging (eg from the Coalition) and, critically, by indigenous, unattributable and unaffiliated voices.

Phase 1: The sowing of DOUBT: Am I doing the right thing? Are my actions religiously sanctioned and in accordance with the Sunna? Do I have the support of those I care about? Is *Daesh* what I thought it was? Am I prepared to die for this organisation? Am I harming my family by staying here? Are others thinking about fleeing? Is time running out for me? Such questions serve to reinforce DOUBT.

Phase 2: The promotion of DISENGAGEMENT: Having sown DOUBT, reduce *Daesh* operational capability, effectiveness, morale and the willingness to soldier, by promoting either mental or physical DISENGAGEMENT.

Phase 3: The encouragement and opportunity to DEFECT: Provide concrete, practical options for those whose doubts have led them through disengagement to seek to DEFECT.

b. Support and amplify indigenous actors to develop and deliver these campaigns (eg, *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently; Mosul Eye*).

c. Finally, link these efforts to support to the Syrian Military Armed Opposition and civilian opposition actors, as it is likely that it will be to these actors on the ground that defections will initially take place, and who will be best placed to assess the good faith of potential defectors.

Conclusions

Daesh is a symptom more than a cause. It metastasised in response to the governance deficit, lack of civilian protection and the failure of the social contract in Syria and Iraq, and perhaps in some of the countries of the West now so concerned about foreign fighters. *Daesh*'s legitimacy rests on three pillars—its ideology, its myth of military supremacy and its claimed state-building competence. The battle to delegitimise or debrand *Daesh* and therefore blunt its appeal will involve undermining these three core tenets. The military coalition response therefore is merely part of this response. In addition, we need to show that, on the ground, where *Daesh* claims to govern competently, fairly and with the support of the local population, it is actually failing. Its biggest failures will be made manifest by those civilians who have lived under its

strictures, and those fighters—foreign and local—who have served in its ranks. The promotion of credible, local counter-*Daesh* defection campaigns must therefore be seen as part of effective delegitimisation efforts with local dissenting voices amplified by demonstrable physical acts of defection.

Frameworks and policies in the United States regarding the foreign fighters

Chapter 14 – Frameworks and policies in the United States regarding the foreign fighters

The processes by which individuals become motivated to leave the United States to take part in conflict on behalf of non-state actors, join a violent extremist group, and potentially attempt to return to the United States raise concerns for the national security community in the United States. The issues created by individuals commonly known as 'foreign fighters' are many. These individuals often come to adopt violent extremist views, become motivated to travel overseas and may then leave the country to do so. Other individuals may be similarly motivated but remain within the United States, choosing to attempt to launch domestic attacks; some individuals may travel overseas, become disillusioned and seek to return to their home countries in a civilian capacity. Still others, believing strongly in the cause for which they travelled to fight may seek to return home to implement the violent agenda put forward by the group they joined.

Further complicating matters is the relatively young age of most individuals who seek to travel overseas to become involved in violence. The long-term consequences are difficult to predict and strategies must therefore be adaptive.

The frameworks and policies of the United States to address the foreign fighter problem focus on three distinct phases of the fighter's life-cycle: the motivation to violence; the mobilisation to travel outside of the United States followed by potential attempts to return; and the possibility of reintegrating individuals who have travelled overseas.

Effectively addressing the phenomenon requires an adaptable strategy to address all distinct phases of the life-cycle. In order to successfully mitigate the threat presented by individuals who are inspired by violent extremist narratives or foreign fighter activities, early identification and engagement of the individuals is vital. In addition, individuals who attempt to travel to undertake violent extremist activity—or return—are part of a larger threat environment facing the United States, as the government attempts to secure adequately borders, infrastructure and cyberspace against national security threats. Integrated and timely

information-sharing is essential to identify and monitor individuals who are attempting to travel.

Finally, for those foreign fighters seeking to return to the United States, determinations must be made about the risks that they pose to national security, as well as how to reintegrate them effectively in a manner that both preserves public safety while also being constructive for the community from which the individual came as well as for the larger society.

Failing to monitor or address any of the key stages of the process will leave critical gaps in the overarching strategy, diminish the ability of intelligence and law enforcement agencies to mitigate the risks posed by foreign fighters, and hamper effective collaboration with key stakeholders and the larger community.

Motivation to violence

The early detection, prevention and intervention of individuals exhibiting a tendency towards violent extremism are critical.

Such efforts are most successful when they are the result of collaboration between government and the community at the local level. In this, the empowerment of communities to develop organic detection, prevention and intervention models is indispensable. This whole community approach, where avenues are provided for cultural groups to work with law enforcement and other government agencies results in the building of trust among all parties. Moreover, this approach has a greater chance of success than an approach that is independently developed and executed by the government, alone.

By involving key stakeholders at the local level, there is a greater chance of identifying individuals who may pose risks before they are motivated to act; individuals considering resort to violence—whether overseas or domestically—often show distinct signs, including withdrawing from traditional social circles. This can lower the profile of an individual and make detection more difficult, particularly by outside parties, unless such behaviour is recognised as potentially concerning. Actors at the community level, be they family, friends, teachers, religious leaders or others, are often in the best position to spot problematic behaviour, provided they have an understanding of what activity can be concerning. Local

community networks can be empowered to serve as active partners in doing so and work collaboratively with government to address it. Critical to this is a level of trust that only becomes real when government is genuinely interested in the future of individuals who are considering, but not yet committed to choose violence.

Current policies place the primary emphasis on punishment—often in the form of lengthy prison terms—rather than intervention and reintegration. While these policies may have some success in combating the flow of foreign fighters, they often alienate key community networks, which can damage trust between those communities and law enforcement. Notably, harsh punishments can discourage family and friends of radicalised individuals from contacting law enforcement for fear of prosecution of their loved ones. Where viable, non-punitive measures are the most constructive. And as seen through the development of detection, prevention and intervention efforts in other contexts (eg, narcotics, gang crimes), top-detection and intervention strategies are both inefficient and ineffective, as each context has unique contributing factors that affect the motivation and engagement of individuals.

Mobilisation to travel and return

For some individuals, identification, prevention and intervention do not come soon enough, or at all. In this, the threat posed by potential foreign fighters fit into a larger context as the United States attempts to understand, ascertain and monitor the conveyance of people, goods, intellectual property and other matters into and out of the country.

The foundation of the effort to identify individuals who are attempting to travel outside the United States to take part in conflicts elsewhere on behalf of non-state actors is timely and accurate information. It is critical for those individuals and entities charged with ensuring the safety and security of the United States to be able to share and access organised, relevant, actionable intelligence within an integrated, efficient system. It is particularly important that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and especially the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA), have timely access to relevant information about individuals who present particular concerns and who are attempting to travel into or out of the country. A Data Framework currently maintained by

DHS provides one overarching entity for the acquisition and management of information and intelligence; such frameworks can only be effective if they are populated with complete and accurate datasets.

The existence of effective information-sharing protocols with strategic partners, particularly in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa is important. If US citizens—or those living in the United States—do manage to leave the country for the purpose of undertaking violent activity elsewhere, it is important that both US and international security partners track the location and activities of those individuals, particularly if they attempt to make their way into combat zones. Strong bilateral communication and information-sharing may also assist in identifying individuals within the United States, based on intelligence and counter-terrorism operations of external parties, that may present risk or concern.

Reintegration

Those individuals who return to the United States after having fought with non-state groups abroad can pose a significant security threat. At that stage, previously identified critical elements come together, as intelligence sharing, punitive criminal justice, and holistic community based-approaches to mitigate it.

The first step in dealing with returnees involves identifying them on their return. Next, the level of threat posed by each returning fighter must be assessed; individuals travelling abroad to fight do not all have identical experiences.

For a variety of reasons, some individuals may never make it to a conflict zone, and they may return to the United States without having been exposed to extremist militants. Others, however, may manage to engage in fighting, and be exposed to extreme levels of violence. Those who return may have become disaffected with their role in the group they had joined. But individuals deliberately sent back to the United States for the purpose of carrying out attacks are a distinct possibility. As a result, each returnee must be individually identified and scrutinised.

The extent to which returning individuals were involved in combat and/or terrorist activity must be determined using a range of tools. While some individuals will be determined to have acted criminally

and may be eligible to face related charges, this approach may not be appropriate for all. For many, reintegration may be more effective.

As with prevention, reintegration must be a coordinated effort between government and community networks. Community and religious leaders, educators, counsellors, and mental health professionals can all play an important role in the reintegration process by providing a comprehensive response to the individual motivations and experiences of the returnees. The appropriate positioning and balance between government, notably law enforcement, and community involvement, will be important. This should be approached with a desire to avoid alienating returnees, their families, and their communities while simultaneously—and always—ensuring public safety objectives are being met.

Even for those foreign fighters facing criminal punishment for their actions, special attention must be paid to their individual motivations and experiences, especially during incarceration. Many may continue to nurture strong ideological convictions, which prison time may exacerbate. Prolonged imprisonment may further radicalise these individuals, making their eventual release extremely difficult. Stakeholders can try to engage imprisoned fighters with the same reintegration strategies applied to those not in prison. By beginning the process of reintegration while these individuals are still incarcerated, the threat posed upon release may be greatly diminished.

Ultimately, reformed foreign fighters can serve as one of the most important and effective resources for law enforcement. Both in terms of preventing radicalisation and easing the reintegration of returned fighters, reformed fighters are uniquely positioned to counter violent extremist narratives. The reformed fighters can be used to draw back foreign fighters while they are still overseas. By sharing their own experience, and alleviating fears of harsh criminal punishment, the reformed fighters can eventually work to reverse the flow of foreign fighters.

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[62] Acronym of the Arabic *Dawla islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa al-Cham* (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), used in the Iraqi-Levantine dialect for several years and today commonplace in the West to refer to the group.

[63] Keeping track of the exact numbers of Western foreign fighters heading to Syria and Iraq is a daunting endeavour for both governments and

researchers. The numbers and ranges included in this article are provided as estimates and are based on the following open sources: *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, published online on 9 December 2015; France's Assemblée Nationale report No. 2828, 2 June 2015; *UK National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015*, published online on 23 November 2015; and "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s", International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), King's College London, published online on 26 January 2015 on ICSR's web site.

[64] IK, or the Caucasus Emirate, is a jihadist organisation active in southern Russia. Its intention is to expel the Russian presence from the North Caucasus and establish an independent Islamic emirate in the region.

[65] The prestige and momentum of ISIL and Omar al-Shishani, in the eyes of young North Caucasians, transformed the landscape of insurgent fighters in Russia. At the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, several insurgent factions in the North Caucasus defected and pledged allegiance to ISIL abandoning their leader, Aliaskhab Kebekov.

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[70] Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

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[73] Aaron Stein, "The ISIS Link to the Ankara Bombing", Atlantic Council, October 15, 2015.

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Appendix A – Workshop agenda

Appendix A – Workshop agenda

The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon and Related Security Trends in the Middle East

A workshop of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service
28-29 October 2015

28 October

9.00 – 9.15	Objectives and structures of the seminar
9.15 – 10.30	**Module 1: A strategic view on the Middle East** • *The long-range drivers of (in)security and (in)stability in the Middle East* • *The future evolution of "jihadism"*
10.30 – 11.00	Break
11.00 – 12.15	**Module 2: Update on the Syrian conflict and Iraq's challenges today** • *Syria: Frozen conflict, festering wound, hope?* • *The evolving strategy and impact of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq*
12.15 – 13.45	Lunch
13.45 – 15.15	**Module 3: Regional forces at play** • *The implications of the Saudi-Iranian relationship on the region* • *Sunni-Shia divisions across the region: The use and consequences of sectarianism* • *Gateway power: Turkey's interests in regional security*

15.15 – 15.30	Seminar Lead's synthesis: *Making sense of the emerging picture – where might we be one year from now?*
15.30	Adjourn

29 October

9.00 – 9.15	*Observations on the value of long-range analysis and open-source intelligence*
9.15 – 10.30	**Module 4: Understanding the foreign fighters phenomenon** • *The big picture: An assessment of the foreign fighters threat to the West* • *The Western foreign fighters' motivations*
10.30 – 11.00	Break
11.00 – 12.15	**Module 5: Perspectives from North American experts** • *The Arab fighters: who are they, where do they go?* • *The fighters from Canada: who are they, where do they go?*
12.15 – 13.45	Lunch
13.45 – 15.15	**Module 6: Perspectives from experts on the European dimension on the foreign fighters challenge** • *The fighters from continental Europe* • *The role of European "jihadists" in ISIL:* • *The fighters from Russia's North Caucasus: Motivations and role*
15.15 – 15.30	Break

15.30 – 16.45	**Module 7: Responding to the foreign fighters phenomenon** • *Assessing frameworks and policies in the United States* • *Local measures to counter the appeal of the fights in Syria and Iraq*
16.45 – 17.00	Seminar Lead's conclusions
17.00	Adjourn

Appendix B – Academic Outreach at CSIS

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Intelligence in a shifting world

It has become a truism to say that the world today is changing at an ever faster pace. Analysts, commentators, researchers and citizens from all backgrounds—in and outside government—may well recognise the value of this cliché, but most are only beginning to appreciate the very tangible implications of what otherwise remains an abstract statement.

The global security environment, which refers to the various threats to geopolitical, regional and national stability and prosperity, has changed profoundly since the fall of Communism, marking the end of a bipolar world organised around the ambitions of, and military tensions between, the United States and the former USSR. Quickly dispelling the tempting end of history theory of the 1990s, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, as well as subsequent events of a related nature in different countries, have since further affected our understanding of security.

Globalisation, the rapid development of technology and the associated sophistication of information and communications have influenced the work and nature of governments, including intelligence services. In addition to traditional state-to-state conflict, there now exist a wide array of security challenges that cross national boundaries, involve non-state actors and sometimes even non-human factors. Those range from terrorism, illicit networks and global diseases to energy security, international competition for resources, and the security consequences of a deteriorating natural environment globally. The elements of national and global security have therefore grown more complex and increasingly interdependent.

What we do

It is to understand those current and emerging issues that CSIS launched, in September 2008, its academic outreach program. By

drawing regularly on knowledge from experts and taking a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach in doing so, the Service plays an active role in fostering a contextual understanding of security issues for the benefit of its own experts, as well as the researchers and specialists we engage. Our activities aim to shed light on current security issues, to develop a long-term view of various security trends and problems, to challenge our own assumptions and cultural bias, as well as to sharpen our research and analytical capacities.

To do so, we aim to:

- Tap into networks of experts from various disciplines and sectors, including government, think-tanks, research institutes, universities, private business and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Canada and abroad. Where those networks do not exist, we may create them in partnership with various organisations;

- Stimulate the study of issues related to Canadian security and the country's security and intelligence apparatus, while contributing to an informed public discussion about the history, function and future of intelligence in Canada.

The Service's academic outreach program resorts to a number of vehicles. It supports, designs, plans and/or hosts several activities, including conferences, seminars, presentations and round-table discussions. It also contributes actively to the development of the Global Futures Forum, a multinational security and intelligence community which it has supported since 2005.

While the academic outreach program does not take positions on particular issues, the results of some of its activities are released on the CSIS web site (http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca). By publicising the ideas emerging from its activities, the program seeks to stimulate debate and encourage the flow of views and perspectives between the Service, organisations and individual thinkers.